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HER FRIEND LAURENCE.

A Novel.

BY

FRANK LEE BENEDICT,
AUTHOR OF 'ST. SIMON'S NIECE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. I.

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To

THE VISCONDESSA DE STO. AMARO:

THE MOST APPRECIATIVE OF READERS,

THE MOST DISCRIMINATING OF CRITICS,

AND THE

WARMEST OF FRIENDS.

AFFECTIONATELY,

FRANK LEE BENEDICT.

FLORENCE, ITALY, *May*, 1879.

CONTENTS OF VOL. I.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	FOR HIS DAUGHTER	1
II.	THE FORBIDDEN PATH	19
III.	THE OMEN	32
IV.	A BOUQUET OF JESSAMINES	60
V.	HER FIRST VISIT	79
VI.	LA BELLE SAMARITAINE	100
VII.	DEAD AS PHARAOH	119
VIII.	HIS DISCOVERY	139
IX.	HER COMING	162
X.	MI-CARÊME	179
XI.	SET RIGHT	197
XII.	THREE-AND-THIRTY	214
XIII.	SHE ACCUSED HERSELF	233
XIV.	THE ARABIC LESSONS	253
XV.	ANNOUNCED—'MISS DANVERS'	266

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HER FRIEND LAURENCE.

CHAPTER I.

FOR HIS DAUGHTER.

The Amaldi Palace stands in a small square not far from the beautiful old church of Santa Maria Novella, fills up nearly one side of the piazza, and is stately enough to be noticeable, rich as Florence is in picturesque and storied edifices.

There are three or four courts, and the vast pile has numerous occupants; but one quadrangle, with its separate entrance, belongs to Violet Cameron. She has not, however, asserted her claims to proprietorship by giving her portion of the mansion a new name; and therein, I think, has shown wisdom Nowadays, in Florence and Rome, the traveller not

unfrequently finds historical dwellings, which have been re-christened under the Anglo-Saxon cognomens of their present owners; but I cannot persuade myself that Palazzo Sankey and Villino Jenkinson sound as well as their original Italian titles.

In the beginning of October, 187—, Miss Cameron returned to Florence, after more than a year's absence, intending to spend the rest of the autumn, and perhaps the whole winter, unless it should prove one of those hopelessly rainy seasons, which the variable Tuscan climate will occasionally disgrace itself by adopting and clinging to for several consecutive months.

At an early hour on the morning after her arrival she was seated in her dressing-room—a pretty nook, with its walls panelled in blue silk, the windows hung with blue and white draperies, and the easy-chairs and couches covered with the faintest possible tint of azure velvet. A door stood open, and showed a boudoir, rich and quaint as a cinque-cento casket; beyond, other open doors gave glimpses of a long suite of apartments, which were the envy of half her acquaintance, though to attempt a description of the various chambers, with their treasures of art and

virtu, would only make this page sound like an auction catalogue.

Miss Cameron had drunk her coffee, and was indulging in the luxury of complete idleness, looking her best, too, in an undress which would have been very trying to many women—a gown of some dead white woollen stuff, loosely confined about the waist by a broad ribbon, and her hair (dark auburn, with golden reflections upon it) brushed back from her forehead, and falling in heavy masses over her shoulders. Even in that severely simple toilet and the rigid truthfulness of the morning light, six-and-twenty was the most a close observer would have assigned as her age; but Violet Cameron had counted three years beyond thirty, and reached the era at which her sex, as a rule, is forced to relinquish all claims to appearing youthful. I think it was the indescribable softness and purity of her complexion which kept her face so young; and even feminine critics never tried to hint that the delicate bloom in her cheeks, like the colour in the heart of a wild rose, was not natural.

Women did say her eyes were green, and, I believe, rightly; but they were nevertheless wonderfully beautiful eyes, which gained

added depth from the blackness of the arched brows, and the lashes so long and thick as to cast that peculiar shadow which less fortunate women are obliged to supply by factitious aids.

She was too small to be called handsome; the features were too irregular for perfect beauty; and her grace and supreme elegance (that highest and most indefinable charm) rendered the term pretty inapplicable. She seemed to have caught certain characteristics of each of the three types, and Nature had managed the combination with such skill that the result was a loveliness as unique as it was indisputable.

Three-and-thirty years of age, and unmarried. So I must call her my elderly heroine, though, in the presence of her radiant fairness, the epithet would have become a positively ludicrous misnomer.

Miss Cameron's meditations were interrupted by the opening of a door; steps crossed the boudoir; and a thin, faded voice, which one would have sworn belonged to an ancient spinster, called, quaveringly:

'Good-morning, dear! May I come in? Excuse this early visit. Clarice said you were up, and I wanted—but it is a shame to disturb you——'

'Pray come in!' Miss Cameron said, as the unseen speaker's sentence trailed off into a sigh. 'I may be uncntertaining, but I am not dangerous, I give you my word.'

The *portière* was pushed farther back by a hand which suited the voice—long, bony, and uncertain in its movements; but it was not until Miss Cameron repeated her invitation that their owner appeared. She gave the effect of unusual height, from the fact that each separate part—neck, waist, and limbs—seemed unduly elongated; and she was so thin that apparently only skin and bones had been left after that drawing-out process.

Fifty-five at least; tiny wrinkles, like cracks in yellow porcelain; straggling cork-screw curls; a perpetual smile; a habit of carrying her head on one side—of breaking her sentences with inexpressibly irritating little gasps—these were Miss Bronson's chief characteristics, whereto I may add a morbid taste in the matter of faded pink bows which she had a mania for pinning on every available spot, from the crown of her head to the toes of her slippers.

'Good-morning, Eliza,' said Miss Cameron.

'I hope you have slept off the fatigues of the journey.'

'Oh, perfectly! And how fresh you look!' with a sigh so much deeper than ordinary, that Miss Cameron added:

'What have you got on your soul or your conscience? Something troubles you, I know. Your voice is more Eolian harp-like than usual.'

'My love, I am in a state of such painful uncertainty!'

'My love, people say that is the normal state of all us spinsters. But sit down and reveal your woes. I don't ask you to weep on my sympathetic bosom, but I will do anything short of drying tears to show my tender interest,' said Miss Cameron, laughingly.

Miss Bronson seated herself, slipped from her arm into her lap a canvas reticule worked with worsted flowers of such discordant hues that they gave her friend a sensation like incipient sea-sickness, and shook her head pensively.

'Are you carrying your trouble in that preposterous bag?' Miss Cameron asked. 'It is ugly enough to hold all the ills of Pandora's box, though Hope would die in disgust if shut up there.'

'I declare, my dear, you are as witty as a play; but I don't know—is it now—at least among foreigners——'

'What in the name of goodness!'

'Exactly *the* thing to talk so differently from everybody else,' sighed Miss Bronson. 'Please don't be offended at my mentioning it, but several times people have said to me, they should know you were an American just by your conversation.'

'I hope so! I don't propose to cultivate stupidity for the sake of being supposed a native of some other country. Perhaps, too, I talk through my nose.'

'Oh no! You have nothing of the nasal intonation.'

'Do say twang, Eliza! We are not schoolmistresses any longer, and there is no necessity for using long words,' said Miss Cameron, laughing outright.

'I wish you would not speak so often of having been a schoolmistress,' expostulated Miss Bronson; 'it does not matter for me, but with your wealth and beauty——'

'My dear, the wealth gives me the privilege of saying what I please! I am proud of having been a school-ma'am! Why, I should be heartily ashamed of myself if I had always

led as useless a life as I do now! I am very doubtful whether fate did me any kindness in putting an end to my drudgery. Good heavens! ten years gone since then—and I meant to have done so much! And here I am thirty-three, and have accomplished literally nothing!'

'You know what French people say—"that a woman in reality has only the age she looks,"' said Eliza, glancing in the mirror as if to determine how many years this privilege would take off her own record.

'French people have talked nonsense in regard to women since the foundation of the Gallic empire' ('Erroneously declared by many authors to have begun with Charlemagne,' parenthesised Miss Bronson'), 'and will continue to do so until the Day of Judgment, whenever they began,' pursued Miss Cameron. 'But never mind my age, or the follies of the Gauls: what secret have you got shut up there?'

At this reminder of her errand, the spinster made a sudden nervous movement which sent several sealed envelopes flying out of the reticule.

'Ugh! I was right to compare the thing to Pandora's box!' slivered Miss Cameron.

She stooped to pick up two of the epistles which had fluttered close to her chair, adding, in the playfully teasing way whereby she often perplexed poor Eliza: 'They are for me! Why were you hiding my correspondence in your sack? If you mean to turn postman I shall buy you a uniform.'

'Oh—oh! don't look—wait till I explain!' cried the antique virgin despairingly, as her friend was about to open the envelopes. 'Please don't look!'

Miss Cameron laid the missives down and watched the spinster execute a kind of weird waltz, which was rather like a caricature of Dinorah's Shadow-dance.

'This is exceedingly mysterious,' she said; 'even awe-inspiring!'

'My dear,' continued Miss Bronson, as soon as she reached the speaking stage of her eccentric exercise, 'I have a message which is, so to speak, a key to the whole matter.'

'Then pray give me the key, else I shall force the lock,' returned Miss Cameron, with a glance towards the letters, which caused Eliza to dance anew.

'One moment—I wanted to break it——'

'I hate broken news as I do broken china, interrupted Miss Cameron. 'Pray give it to

me entire, whatever it may be. If it comes in fragments it will be sure to excoriate my temper, just as broken china would my fingers.'

'You make me laugh so! He! he! ha! ha!' And, as a proof that her merriment was heart-felt, Miss Bronson began to cry.

Any person unaccustomed to the spinster's vagaries would either have been alarmed or ready to shake her from sheer impatience, but experience had taught Miss Cameron that emotion of any sort in the presence of Eliza's small agitations was usually emotion wasted, for, as a rule, the slighter the cause, the more force she put into her demonstrations. So now her friend only said, composedly .

'You will tell me when you can.'

'Yes—I—wanted to break—' sobbed Eliza; then gave a great gulp and burst out, 'Your cousin George Danvers is dead.'

Miss Cameron changed colour, put her hand over her eyes, and remained silent for a few seconds, during which Eliza sat choking behind her pocket-handkerchief, and by the time she emerged from its depths Miss Cameron had resumed her former attitude.

'He died to me so many years since that I cannot pretend to be deeply affected,' she said,

in a voice which was awed rather than saddened. 'If he can see me—or cares to see—he is certain that I have no hard feeling towards him. Once I thought I could never say this, but I can now, freely.'

'Oh, my dear, that is like you! But only think—he had lost his fortune—every penny. His daughter is left absolutely destitute.'

'Do you know, I had forgotten he had a daughter,' returned Miss Cameron, with a little wonder in her tone. 'That shows me how completely I had put him and his out of my mind! Yes, he had a daughter—she must be eighteen. His wife died?'

'To be sure; and he married again. It seems the poor girl and her stepmother are not good friends—oh! his letter is heart-breaking!'

'He wrote to you?'

'And to you,' said Eliza, pointing towards the epistles on the table. 'Only think! they have been lying here more than a month; and oh, he does so plead—it would soften a stone! The wife can go to her relations—but the unfortunate girl will not be received by them——'

'I think the quickest way to make me understand the whole matter will be to let me

read the explanations,' Miss Cameron interrupted, with a mildness which spoke volumes for her powers of self-restraint. 'Give me your letter first, please.'

Eliza declared that she had already done so, and was astounded when accused of guarding it still in her Pandora's box. She handed out a packet of cough lozenges, then a roll of knitting, then a receipted hotel-bill—insisting wildly that each article in turn was the required epistle, and weeping bitterly all the while. Finally, Miss Cameron took possession of the bag and turned its multifarious contents upon the table. Eliza shrieked over the confusion her friend was making, but Miss Cameron did not heed her distress. She found the document at length, and said :

'You can pick up the things while I am reading. Please don't speak to me till I have finished ; I am so dull that I can only attend to one thing at a time ;' which was as near a reproof as she ever went in her dealings with this sometimes troublesome daughter of Vesta.

Eliza began collecting her treasures, and Miss Cameron read the letter through, then observed calmly :

'What a miserable opinion the poor man

had of human nature up to the very last, since he thought it necessary to write you this piteous appeal to try and touch my hard heart.'

'Oh, my dear, he felt he had wronged you so terribly!'

'And he supposed I would be unforgiving. It was natural, no doubt, for him to fear that, since in my case he would have been——'

'But the poor girl? And he is gone where——'

Miss Cameron held up her hand and finished the sentence thus:

'Where the things of this world must look very unimportant, since they do so to us ten years after their happening, however weighty they seemed at the time.'

Miss Bronson feared that the assertion sounded sadly unorthodox, and went out of the room in silence; partly because she perceived it would be cruel to inflict further companionship on Violet, partly to meditate over this speech, and prepare herself to convict her friend, in case conscience and certain old Calvinistic writers, in whose gloomy polemics she had a faith which we will hope is rare in our day, should decide that the sentiment savoured of heresy.

Miss Cameron examined her letters, opening first the epistle from George Danvers—the utterance of a dying man; and, as such, according to the creeds in which we have all been reared, a communication to be received with solemn respect.

An odd thought crossed Violet Cameron's mind as she read—one which others of us have had under similar circumstances, and been startled thereby, because so utterly opposed to our theories—namely, why, because the man was dying, should any particular weight attach to his request?

Fathers, on their death-beds, ask pledges of their children, which must fetter those children for years; husbands beg wives never to marry; wives entreat husbands not to wed some particular woman. Having received the desired promises, the departing spirits go tranquilly out of the world—go away, we believe, to an existence fuller of fruition than this, to a happiness of which happiness here can give no conception—certainly not regretting the friends they have left, else they could not find peace even in heaven—living new lives, untrammelled by any duty to their mourners on earth, who are considered worse than heathens if they fail to obey every wish

of the dead, however unreasonable, however difficult, or, indeed, impracticable, the changes of this mortal sphere may render such obedience. Violet indulged this reflection ; then was a little shocked ; then thought herself silly for being so. But George Danvers had asked nothing which she deemed unreasonable or shrank from granting.

Miss Cameron's widowed father had died soon after her seventeenth birthday. George Danvers settled his estate. The orphan was declared penniless, but the executor speedily became wealthy. A few people suspected him of cheating. Violet felt assured of his guilt ; for her father, during his brief illness, had shown her that the property he left (consisting of large coal and iron mines), though involved, would afford her an ample income, if matters were honestly and wisely conducted.

She had refused to become a pensioner on her relative's bounty, and had told him her certainty that he was a robber. He had grossly defrauded—he admitted this in his letter—but he had always meant to right her when he should grow rich enough ! Now death stood near ; a sudden financial crisis had ruined him ; and in all the world there

was no human being to whom he could appeal in his daughter's behalf, save to the cousin whom he had so deeply wronged.

The stepmother wrote, just after her husband's death, a letter full of complaints and self-commiseration. Her own fortune had been swallowed up, and she could not ask her relations to burthen themselves with the care of a girl who, ever since her father's second marriage—an event which had occurred some six years previous—had plainly shown that she considered his new wife and her connections interlopers and foes.

The third letter was from the orphan, Mary Danvers, written still later—girlish, high-flown, but not a bad letter by any means—its whole tenor proving her ignorance of the causes which had separated the cousins for so many years.

Miss Cameron recollected that, owing to the long delay, the poor child might have suffered torments worse than those of purgatory; at least, no more time should be lost. She prepared a telegram for her lawyer in New York, telling him how and where to communicate with Mary Danvers, and promising letters by the next steamer; though, if any suitable escort offered before their

arrival, the young lady might start on her voyage. This done, she wrote to him and to George's daughter; and, as she finished, Eliza Bronson appeared again, with her eyes and nose in a pitiable state, and her doubts in regard to Miss Cameron's heresy still unsettled.

'Read these, Eliza,' said Violet, holding out the epistles.

The spinster slowly perused the two, and exclaimed:

'Really, dear, you are almost an angel, if only you wouldn't give in to foreign carelessness about spending Sunday!'

'Please have the despatch sent at once, and the letters put in the post,' said Miss Cameron. 'And just call Clarice. I shall go for a ride. The air will do me good.'

'Yes,' Miss Bronson assented; but her tone and manner showed that she still had a weight on her mind, and desired to be questioned.

'What is it?' Miss Cameron asked resignedly.

'About—about mourning. Shall you put on black?'

'No,' Miss Cameron replied, without hesitation.

'My dear, that will look so odd! Everybody does it for a few weeks—say six, if not a very near relative.'

'George Danvers has already been dead almost two months,' said Miss Cameron. 'To go into black now would only be exposing myself to hear and answer the same question forty times each day for the next fortnight.'

'Yes, but custom, my dear—custom!'

'Since people do not know what has happened, their prejudices cannot be shocked.'

'Very well!' sighed Miss Bronson.

'Eliza,' said her friend, coldly, 'when my father died, I was so poor that I could not buy mourning. Do you think it fitting I should adopt it for his—for George Danvers?'

'I — I — perhaps not,' murmured the spinster.

Miss Cameron went into her bedroom. By the time Eliza had reached the boudoir, she called:

'I dare say you are right! I will wear white and lavender and grey for a few weeks. Now I hope your conscience is at rest.'

Miss Bronson wept again, and retired, so satisfied in every particular, that she could not have been more complacent had they just heard of a wedding instead of a death.

CHAPTER II.

THE FORBIDDEN PATH.

Miss Cameron mounted her horse and rode off into the Cascine, finding the lovely wood deserted as it usually is, save for an hour or two before sunset.

Away to the right, Fiesole and its range of blue hills, glorious with sunshine, shut in the view; on the left, through the aisles of trees, Violet caught glimpses of the Arno and the plain beyond. A low breeze sang among the branches like a harp accompaniment to the songs of the birds—the sky was a vast dome of turquoise, flecked here and there with opal clouds—and, in spite of her grave preoccupation, the beauty of the scene did not escape Miss Cameron's eyes. She loved nature, as she did everything else beautiful, with a genuine love, and Italy possessed for her that peculiar attraction which it must have for all

imaginative people. She was given to-day dreams, which, had she transcribed them, might have made her known as a poet; but she never thought of doing this—they were her chief treasures, which she liked to keep sacred between herself and her soul. She had learned to guard her secret when in girlhood life suddenly assumed an aspect so bald and commonplace that she fostered this visionary faculty in order to forget now and then the coldness and closeness of existence. A governess inclined to dreams would be a *lusus naturæ* intolerable to parents or the wise heads of scholastic institutions, and Violet's fancies were not allowed to interfere with the conscientious fulfilment of her duties.

In the early days she had been forced to struggle hard for patience—had felt like a caged bird—as if she must die if relief did not come. But by degrees she conquered that restlessness, gradually grew accustomed to the routine and restraint, and, if not happy, perhaps as nearly reached contentment as youth often does.

Violet did not remember her mother; when she was a little child Miss Bronson had been selected for her governess, who if not a woman of powerful intellect, was at least

well-informed, prudent, and loved her charge most tenderly.

When orphanage and poverty overtook Violet, Miss Bronson would gladly have toiled for and supported her, but this the girl would not permit, so Eliza obtained situations for both in a boarding-school where she had herself been educated. Violet, at first received as a pupil-teacher, rose rapidly in rank till, before her season of toil ended, she stood next to the stately lady who ruled in those halls of Minerva, and the destiny to which my heroine had looked forward was of one day becoming mistress of the establishment.

The change to her present position had arrived as unexpectedly as the tempest which at her father's death flung her from luxury into want—it possessed, too, a certain halo of romance.

During a summer vacation she accompanied one of the scholars to her home, and there formed the acquaintance of a gentleman who had known her parents. Mr. Goring was no longer young—a widower, and standing very much alone in the world. He fell in love with the beautiful governess, and her friends thought her insane to decline his hand.

Reason and common-sense urged her to accept, but, at the end of the six months' probation he had begged, she definitely refused his offer. It was hard to cast aside the future which showed so bright in contrast to her surroundings—harder to give him pain, for his whole heart centred in his plea. But, to her mind, a marriage unsanctified by love —love so strong that it could work miracles— became a bartering of body and soul, from which she recoiled with unutterable loathing. Other women, feeling the respect and esteem which she felt, might have accepted—been right in so doing: to her it was simply impossible.

Eighteen months later Mr. Goring died in Brazil, and, with the exception of legacies to his dead wife's relatives—he had none of his own—bequeathed his vast fortune to Violet Cameron. There would be nothing specially interesting in the records of the ensuing decade, looking back from which the old work-aday epoch seemed strangely unreal. It had passed as it might have been expected to do with a woman rich, beautiful, and unmarried —save in one particular: nothing like love had touched her heart—not so much as a brief fancy which she could weave an idyl

over. She had lived in the world, been surrounded by admirers; but no voice from any man's soul had possessed power to waken a response in hers.

Even women never thought of setting her down anywhere near her age; if she told it to some confidant she was not believed, and Eliza Benson, exaggeratedly scrupulous in general, burthened her conscience with many prevarications to prevent such possibility.

That she had gone so many years beyond all claim to girlhood appeared inconceivable to Violet herself, even when she laughingly adopted the title of old maid. She was as young in her feelings as her face—naturally enough, too, since love, life's profoundest mystery, remained only a name and a dream.

Violet rode on more and more rapidly, trying to forget the hosts of perplexed, inexplicable fancies which beset her, following in the wake of the recollections roused by George Danvers's letter. She turned her horse so abruptly down one of the side alleys that she nearly exterminated a gentleman who had just emerged into it from the recesses of the wood.

They caught sight of each other at the same

instant. The gentleman sprang aside, and Miss Cameron reined in her steed so suddenly that she sent him back on his haunches. She received a somewhat reproachful glance from the stranger, then Selim engaged her attention, for, offended at the unexpected and vigorous check, he began to stand on his hind legs and perform antics more like those of a trained horse in a circus than was agreeable to his rider.

Her narrowly-escaped victim stood watching the exhibition, no doubt with the intention of coming to her aid if assistance should prove necessary; but in a very few seconds she convinced Selim that wisdom would dictate a return to his duty and the legitimate use of his limbs. Violet was about to speak some words of apology and hurry on, when she dropped her whip, which the gentleman picked up, and she, sufficiently vexed with herself and Selim to be unreasonable, hastily decided that even the ceremonious lifting of the stranger's hat conveyed a fresh reproach.

Of course she could do no less than offer her thanks, and, as she looked full at him, she perceived her blunder: the dullest woman living could not have mistaken the expression

in his face for anything save wondering and respectful admiration. Still she could not resist saying :

'I must beg your pardon. I ought not to have ridden so fast round the corner ; but it is very unsafe for any person to walk in these alleys, meant only for equestrians.'

He smiled slightly, still he did smile, and evidently in amusement at her neatly-combined apology and reproof.

'The next turning is the one the signora should have taken,' he said, with a bow. As he spoke he pointed to a signboard at the side of the road, and Violet read thereon, printed in very legible characters and in two languages, 'Per i pedoni—for foot-passengers.'

'It seems I was in the wrong every way. Pardon again,' she said ; and, to make matters worse, she felt herself colouring like a schoolgirl.

Her groom rode up at this juncture, and repeated the announcement that his mistress had strayed into forbidden paths ; but Violet urged Selim on, and the groom was obliged to follow, and her haste lost her the slight satisfaction of hearing that the guardians of the wood might bear a portion of the blame for removing the bar which ought to have ob-

structed the route. The gentleman went his way and Miss Cameron went hers—or the way not hers by right—and of course both took with them some thought of the brief encounter.

Violet had spoken in Italian, and the stranger had replied in the same tongue, but her trained ear caught a foreign accent.

'Not English, however,' was her reflection.

'He looked like some of those handsome men one sees in Athens. No doubt he is a Greek—a worthless race as a rule; and I would wager anything he is no exception.'

As for the gentleman, his meditations, conducted in the same language as her own, ran somewhat in this fashion:

'What a superb creature! However, I dare say she never looked so well before and never will again! Difficult to make that woman turn back, whatever path she had started on. How old? Not a young miss, certainly — five-and-twenty perhaps. How vexed she tried to be with me just because herself in the wrong! However, it was like a woman—like anything human, for that matter, though we men always pretend to think such little errors are monopolised by the softer sex.'

Miss Cameron reached home for the twelve o'clock breakfast, and found a note from a friend awaiting her.

'You dearest, wickedest, most delightful of creatures!—Carlo heard last night of your arrival. If you meant to let the day pass without sending me word, don't admit the fact, else I never, never will forgive you! We are out at the villa. I am literally tied fast by the foot, or ankle, which I managed to sprain a week ago with an awkwardness that merited the punishment it received. Half a dozen people—only among the nicest of our set—are coming this evening to condole with me; be sure to brighten us by adding yourself to the number. As a reward I will present two or three charming new men—only you are a hard-hearted wretch, and this will be no inducement.

'But come at all events, that I may hate you for having grown more beautiful and bewitching than ever, as everybody who met you last winter says you have. The idea of your stopping so long away from our dear Florence, where we are all as charming and sinful as usual, and adore you as you do not deserve to be adored, icicle of a barbarian

that you are, and nobody more devoted than your affectionate

'Nina Magnoletti.'

Then followed a long postscript, which carried the note into the middle of a second sheet, and still left some bit of wonderful news unfinished—the whole written in graceful French, though apparently a spider's leg had been employed as a pen—caressing, careless, *décousu;* in short, a letter very characteristic of its writer, a pretty little Russian who several years previous had gilded afresh one of the old Florentine titles with her roubles, carrying a heart into the transaction and receiving one in return, which she still owned, in spite of numerous temporary aberrations on the part of its original proprietor.

'I shall go to Nina's to-night,' Miss Cameron said to Eliza, more thoughtful of her old friend than Madame Magnoletti had been. 'I don't ask you to go with me because I know you are tired, and besides, they are sure to play baccarat, and that always shocks your scruples.'

'My dear, do not call them scruples.'

'Your morality, then—any fine-sounding name you please.'

This was said late in the day, as the two were driving in the Cascine.

'It is too early to expect Florentines to be back from their *villeggiatura*, but I see quite a number, and a good many foreigners,' pursued Miss Cameron, as they approached the open space where it is the habit for carriages to halt; a habit formed in the days when a band played there, and people stopped under pretence of listening to the music—a thing nobody ever did by any chance. Then she added hastily, 'Oh, that horrid Greek!'

'What horrid Greek?' asked Eliza.

'I don't know, and I don't want to! I nearly demolished him this morning, and he was so exasperatingly polite that I hate him.'

'That gentleman on the grey horse? Why, he is not horrid at all! What a very elegant man!'

'He shall be Adonis if you choose, but I hate him all the same! For mercy's sake don't look that way—he will know I have been telling you—he is capable of bowing. Those Greeks are equal to any impertinence.'

'Did he tell you he was a Greek?' asked the literal Eliza.

'Good heavens! Do you suppose I stopped

to inquire into his history and antecedents? No doubt they would form a sweet tale for virginal ears to listen to! Eliza, Eliza! I begin to fear that foreign wickedness has contaminated you! I shall send you back to America to recover your—what shall I call it?—moral tone. Now that, I think, is a fine phrase!'

'You make me laugh so, that you put everything out of my head!' cried Eliza, as soon as she could recover her gravity. 'Did you nearly run over him? Do tell me about it,' for the spinster dearly loved anything in the shape of a romance.

Violet was spared answering; the victoria had stopped, and was immediately surrounded by a group of men eager to welcome the heiress, and Eliza received a share of the superabundant compliments, since she lived near the rose, and her good opinion might be of value. But she did not forget the stranger, and suddenly said in English to Miss Cameron:

'There he is again! Such a melancholy face; it is quite attractive! Just ask his name——'

'I would not hear it for the world,' interrupted Violet; 'don't I tell you I hate the

man! You dreadful woman, showing an improper interest in a depraved Greek!'

A fresh invasion of admirers claimed Miss Cameron's attention, and Eliza herself was so engrossed that she had no opportunity to gain any information concerning Violet's enemy, for when she recollected him, and turned to get another glance, the grey horse and its rider had disappeared.

CHAPTER III.

THE OMEN.

Miss Cameron did not reach the Magnoletti villa until rather late, and she found madame's 'half-dozen' friends increased to several times that number, who, with invitation or without, had presented themselves.

In one room there was music—in another men, and women too, were playing baccarat, and the pretty hostess reclined on a sofa in the centre salon, arrayed as an invalid in the most becoming costume imaginable.

She received Violet with rapturous greetings, and made her sit down beside the couch, about which gathered knots of people anxious to renew their acquaintance with the beautiful American; but after awhile the two friends were left more at liberty, and able, in the intervals of general conversation, to exchange

notes upon matters which possessed a personal interest.

In the midst of some story madame was relating she noticed Miss Cameron start and turn uneasily in her chair.

'What is the matter?' she asked.

'I don't know,' Violet replied carelessly, though shivering from head to foot. 'A sudden chill, as if somebody were walking over my grave: you remember our senseless English saying?'

'Yes,' rejoined the marchesa. 'But it is not senseless—I believe in it! I am dreadfully superstitious, like any true Russian.'

'You are a dear little Muscovite goose—no, duck!' said Violet, trying to laugh, but unable to subdue the singular nervous trembling.

Nina laughed with the same apparent effort; she was startled by her friend's change of colour, and the troubled expression in her eyes.

'You are not well,' she said, desirous to reassure herself and Violet by assigning a physical cause to the disturbance. 'You were tired from your journey, and the drive out here has upset you.'

'Yes, that is it—I'm tired,' Miss Cameron answered, holding her fan before her face.

Though ordinarily little given to presentiments, the sensation which oppressed her seemed a warning of danger—not bodily peril; as if some element inimical to her peace were about to force itself into her life.

The marchesa beckoned to a gentleman and bade him bring a glass of wine. While she was thus occupied, Violet, wondering at her own folly, could not resist glancing about, half expecting to see some mysterious object start up and, by its hostile presence, explain the omen.

Another instant and her eyes fell upon a person standing in a window opposite. He had not been there a few moments before, she knew. His gaze met hers. She recognised the stranger whom she had encountered in the morning. Violet almost felt that her laughing assertion to Miss Bronson had been the truth—she hated this man! Who was he? what was he? how came he there?

He stood leaning one arm on the sill—tall, pale; the mouth shrouded by a long drooping moustache, the thick curling hair somewhat worn off the temples; the countenance intel-

lectual and handsome, stamped with that peculiar melancholy which in another age was regarded as a premonition of early or violent death, though the breadth of the head and the vigour of the finely-moulded chin preserved the face from any signs of the weakness of character which usually belong to that type of physiognomy.

Violet turned impatiently away. The messenger had come back with the wine, which she drank to escape expostulations; then the gentleman was despatched upon some new errand, just to be got rid of, and Violet, making a strong effort to listen, heard Nina say, apparently continuing a sentence lost upon her:

'I want you to know him. He went with us to the lakes, and Carlo and I both like him hugely. Are you better now? Ah, here he comes.' And the stranger was standing before her, and Nina saying: 'My dear, let me present one of your countrymen. Mr. Aylmer, you told me you had never had the pleasure of meeting Miss Cameron. I shall expect you to be my devoted slave all winter for affording you the happiness.'

Mr. Aylmer was bowing to her, Violet, but answering the marchesa:

'Since I am only human, I must be that, whether I will or no.'

'Question!' cried Madame Magnoletti. '*Are* men human? My own opinion is that they have no claim to be so considered, in spite of their assertions—*qu'en dis-tu, ma Violette?*'

And Violet, able to bend her head in response to the introduction, leaned back in her chair, and played negligently with her fan, finding some slow, half-disdainful, fine lady notes in her voice wherewith to reply.

'As to the race, female philosophy does not go far enough to decide. In particular instances, it can only admit that a mysterious Providence has granted poor woman nothing better.'

'For victims,' rejoined Aylmer, laughing so lightly that, in her overstrained mood the pleasant sound gave Violet a shock—a beneficial one, acting upon her mind as a dash of cold water would have done upon her physical nerves.

Straightway her composure returned; she was ready to smile at her late absurd sensation, to pronounce it simply a result of bodily fatigue; above all things, to refuse Mr. Aylmer any share in its meaning, even if it

were to be considered magnetic or supernatural.

And Nina, watching her, rejoiced to see that the odd discomposure had passed, in no way connecting Aylmer therewith ; in spite of her quickness not having perceived that Violet's eyes had so much as glanced towards him while he stood in the window.

They talked gaily for a few moments, then other men came up, and Mr. Aylmer yielded his place. When an opportunity offered, Nina asked :

'What do you think of him ? I did not say too much. He really is charming—now admit it, mademoiselle la difficile !'

'Which "him" ?' returned Violet. 'You have presented three different men to me within the last ten minutes.'

'Your countryman—Laurence Aylmer—the others are of no consequence. You know, as a rule, Carlo does not take to foreigners, any more than Florentines do generally ; but he came to us under unusual auspices,' pursued Nina, eagerly. 'Alexis is travelling in America—I wrote you so—I am sure it was your fault he went off ! You heartless thing ! why wouldn't you be my sister ?'

'Nonsense !'

'Oh, very well—you are a barbarous wretch! However, it is not Alexis and his broken heart that are in question now, but this stranger within our gates! You must know Alexis was out hunting on those dreadful American prairies—tigers—no, buffaloes—or whatever it is they hunt there—and he fell ill with some horrible fever, such as one must go to America to catch, and along comes Aylmer with his party and nurses Alexis, and saves his life. Now isn't it like a story?'

'Very like,' Violet replied languidly.

'You don't care!' cried Nina. 'Alexis, and Aylmer, and every other man might be devoured by fevers or buffaloes, and you would only yawn. Well, I shall finish my history just to punish you. Alexis thought he was dying, and made Aylmer promise to come and break the news to me; but after all he didn't die.'

'Naturally, he did not do what he said he should—being mortal' observed Violet. 'But since Count Apraxin failed to keep his word, what sent my countryman in search of you?'

'Oh, he was coming to Europe in any case, it seems. Alexis had written us volumes

about him, and of course we received him with open arms; you know how warm-hearted Carlo is, in spite of his pretence at cynicism.'

'Though I did not know his generous impulses went to the length of allowing you to receive young men with open arms.'

'Don't be literal—it is always coarse. Well, his whole story is a romance. He lost a fortune through the villany of some man he had trusted—so he has taken to literature, and comes here to write a book. It ought to be poetry, but it isn't—though he looks a poet, every inch of him! Archæological, Carlo says; but, thank heaven, I don't know what it means, and when Carlo tried to explain, I went fast asleep: though, I give you my word, I woke up quickly enough when he flew into a rage and said he was going to see Giulia da Rimini. My dear, she is more odious and outrageous than ever. But where was I?' gasped Nina, stopping to take breath.

'I have not the least idea,' groaned Violet. 'You are worse than the waters of Lodore—if you ever heard of them.'

'I have—I know as much English as you! But no matter; you'll not get rid of my story by abusing me.'

'Do you mean to say the story is not ended yet?'

'Well, I am afraid it is—but now own that he looks like a hero! And isn't it quite in keeping for him to be ruined? And of course he must find a princess to fall in love with him—only it seems dreadful he should not be rich; and I hope that wretch who brought it about has to suffer—Mr. Han—Ban—no, Danvers! A villain, my dear, and one of your countrymen, too, as might be expected—take that scratch for your impertinence. Of course Aylmer has not said a word, but Alexis wrote us all about it, and I remembered the wretch's ugly name—George Danvers.'

Another of George Danvers's victims—certainly a reason for Violet to sympathise with the man, instead of trying to fancy that she disliked him because of the morning's unfortunate encounter.

'George Danvers!' she repeated mechanically.

'Yes; but never mind him—he is dead and gone,' said Nina. 'I want everybody to like Aylmer; he is a great favourite already. Now you won't hate him, will you?'

'Not unless you worry me about him,' replied Violet.

'I promise! And I have an idea! There is that terrifically rich little American girl down in Rome—I forget her name; but she would be the very *partie* for him.'

And here, to Miss Cameron's relief, other guests came up and engrossed the marchesa's attention. Violet accepted some man's arm and walked through the salons, talking and being talked to, as was her duty—stopping for a little in the card-room behind the Marchese Magnoletti's chair, at his request, to bring him good luck.

After awhile she found herself in the music-hall, and paused to listen to a young professional, with the most delicious tenor voice Florence had discovered in years. Then she suddenly felt a longing to escape from everybody for a few minutes, and seized an opportunity when she could stray unperceived into a gallery beyond. She stood by one of the windows, looking out over the moonlit lawn and gardens. She heard a step on the marble pavement, turned, and saw Mr. Aylmer walking back and forth at the farther end of the great apartment, where a row of pillars cast long black shadows across the dazzling floor.

She moved slowly towards him. He stood still, watching her. The moonlight, which transfigures all objects, rendered her wondrously beautiful. He had an odd fancy that he was seeing her as her soul would appear in a higher stage of existence, freed from the shackles which fetter us here.

'Mr. Aylmer,' she said, in her low, clear tones.

He came forward, the admiration, which just then had a certain solemnity akin to awe mingled with it, visible in his face; but Violet was too much occupied with her own thoughts to notice. As he reached her side, she said abruptly:

'I want you to tell me something about George Danvers and his family.'

He regarded her in astonishment. Evidently, too, the subject was a painful one to him.

'How did you know they were acquaintances of mine?' he asked.

'Of course the marchesa told me,' she answered, and could hear an impatient ring in her voice, which troubled her as a sort of rudeness, though she could no more check it than find a satisfactory reason therefor.

'The marchesa has been told nothing of them by me,' he said, a little coldly.

'At least, she knows that you met with losses through Mr. Danvers—never mind how she knew it,' returned Violet, marvelling more and more at herself; and, indeed, this almost peremptory abruptness was so unlike her ordinary demeanour that her best friends would have marvelled too. 'You did have trouble through his means?'

'I beg your pardon, Miss Cameron. I do not think I ought to talk of him, unless you have some strong motive for desiring it. He is dead, and I do not want to be harsh or unjust.'

'George Danvers was my cousin. I want to hear about his daughter. You know her? Well, tell me what she is like.'

'A little—it strikes me now I know she is a relative—a little like you,' returned he, after a pause, in which he had appeared somewhat disturbed, naturally enough, after such sudden touching of a deep wound.

'Like me? I am not sure that is a recommendation,' Violet answered, trying to get back her ordinary manner.

'Nor is she,' he said. 'I cannot explain what I mean. There is a suggestion of you in her, nothing more—I don't know how to express it—as there is of a flower in a bud.'

'Poetical, but not clear,' said Miss Cameron,

with a laugh. 'So you suffered through that wretched man? I fear he was a very bad one—not even kind to his wife and daughter.'

'I fear not,' Aylmer replied, and his voice showed that he could reveal more had he chosen—showed, too, that he did not choose. 'I never heard Danvers speak of you. Your relationship takes me by surprise,' he added.

'No, he was not likely to speak of me,' she said. 'We had not met for many years. I wrote to his daughter this morning. I have invited her to come to me. I am sorry you suffered at the father's hands.'

'Oh, at twenty-seven, when one loses only money, one ought not to complain,' Aylmer replied cheerfully. 'I have health, strength—a good deal left, you see.'

'Twenty-seven!' Why should the words give Violet a fresh shock? Why should she mentally repeat them again and again? She did, though, vexed with herself the while—more than ever irritated against him, asking her conscience if this rose from envy. Twenty-seven, and a man—his whole life before him! And she thirty-three, and a woman—youth a thing of the past. Even had she numbered only his years, this would still be the case, since—she was a woman.

She began walking up and down between the pillars. Her long silken skirts trailed over the pavement, their soft ivory tint making a pretty contrast to the cold, bluish-white of the marble. The moonbeams wove a crown about her hair, which looked black in their glory; her eyes black too, unnaturally large and bright, from the inexplicable unrest which had troubled her soul during the last hour.

He walked beside her; and for a few moments they talked of Italy, of Florence, of the galleries, and, as suddenly as her unrest had seized her, the feeling died.

'Was ever woman in such an idiotic mood as I am?' Violet thought. 'I am frightened, cross—everything that is silly, and all without reason.' Then she said aloud: 'Now I must go back. After all, you have told me nothing about George Danvers's daughter. You shall do that another time.'

Again he looked somewhat troubled, but she had her head turned away.

'Whenever I have the pleasure of seeing you again,' he said.

'The marchesa will bring you to my house, if you like to come,' she answered. Then that same ill-disposed impulse rose in her

breast anew, and she added, 'I am just off a long journey; after awhile, when I get rested, I shall begin to receive people.'

She moved on so quickly that he could not help understanding he was not to follow, and he remained gazing after her as she glided away like a spirit among the moonbeams.

Violet, reflecting that her behaviour during the entire interview had been open to censure, again marvelled what could render her this night so unlike herself, and, once more back in the salon, rushed into her gayest mood and charmed everybody. Later, she caught a glimpse of Mr. Aylmer standing silent near the marchesa's sofa. After that she did not see him again.

Violet's carriage was the last to leave the villa; Nina had kept her for more confidential talk over nothing, and Carlo insisted upon his right to a little attention, vowing that he had been afforded no opportunity even to speak to her.

'You should make opportunities,' said Nina.

'As I am neither baccarat nor Giulia da Rimini, I cannot expect him to take so much trouble,' rejoined Violet.

Carlo wrung his hands, and declared that, between his wife and the woman he worshipped, no man was ever so ill-treated as he, and altogether they wasted a good half-hour in nonsense, which would not repay for the trouble of setting down in black and white, though it amused the speakers sufficiently.

Violet drove away up the dazzlingly white road, so preoccupied that she did not notice how fast the horses went, or that several times her faithful Antonio, seated on the box, spoke reprovingly to the coachman, who remained obstinately deaf to his expostulations.

The night was unusually warm for Tuscany at that season; summer seemed to have come back during the last few days. The landau had been left open, and a soft breeze, odorous of fields and woods, kissed Violet's cheek; the moon glowed like a great disk of illuminated alabaster in mid-heaven; the farther hills rose shadowy and gigantic in the silvery, mysterious light.

Now the sound of rapidly-rushing water became audible, and a sharp turn in the road brought them close to a stream swollen by late rains to ominous dimensions.

The highway grew very narrow here ; a break in the wall which guarded it on the side of the torrent, had not been mended. The horses took fright at a dog which ran past barking fiercely ; they swerved and reared. The coachman plied the lash ; Antonio shrieked at him in angry alarm, and Violet suddenly roused herself to a sense of the danger by which they were menaced—a fall over the precipitous bank.

Before she could move, a man started out from the shadow of a tree close to the edge of the stream, waved his hatful lin the faces of the terrified animals, and as they backed, seized them by the bridles. At the same instant, Antonio snatched the reins from the coachman, and tugging thereat with all his force, helped to turn the horses' heads into the road again.

The danger was over, but even as Violet thought this, the beasts plunged forward, and the pole struck the man's shoulder with such violence that he fell backwards.

There followed a few seconds of partial insensibility, fuller of agony than any pain she had ever endured, from the ability her mind preserved to take in a sense of utter helplessness ; then the horses had been stopped,

and she saw Antonio stooping over a body prostrate in the dust. Presently—how she got there she could no more have told than if she had been in some dreadful dream—she was beside him, looking down into the face of Laurence Aylmer—cold, white, fixed; the face of a dead man, she thought; a man killed in the very act of saving her life.

Violet heard her own voice—though the words seemed spoken without her volition—saying:

'Is he dead?'

'I cannot tell,' Antonio replied, in the same half-whispering tone. They both stared anew at the white face that he supported on his knee, and another question broke simultaneously from their lips:

'What are we to do?'

The coachman came up; he had fastened the horses to a tree, where they stood quiet enough now the mischief was done, and he himself appeared perfectly sober, whatever he might have been before the accident occurred.

He leaned forward, studied the white face in his turn, and muttered:

'*È fatto di lui!*'

'And if so, you murdered him!' returned

Antonio, in a fierce whisper; 'you drunken assassin!'

'I was not drunk,' said the coachman, hoarsely; 'I had a presentiment of evil on me—ask the marchese's cook if I did not tell him so.'

Violet caught the explanation, and with difficulty refrained from a burst of hysterical laughter. There was something hideous, revolting in the fat, coarse creature's looks and speech in that presence, which hurt her like a broad farce intruded in the midst of a tragedy.

'And you fulfilled your presentiment?' said Antonio.

'Holy Saint Joseph, only listen to him!' groaned the coachman, flinging up both arms.

'Hush!' Violet said sternly, and her voice silenced the pair. She turned sick and cold, but the lethargy which had locked her senses and kept her powerless as a person in a nightmare, suddenly passed—she could think and act. 'You must put him into the carriage,' she said. 'Quick, Antonio! don't lose any more time.'

Both men were sane enough to carry out an order, though neither would have been

capable of suggesting an idea. They managed between them to lift their burthen into the landau. Violet took off a thin scarf, which was wrapped about her head, and bade Antonio dip it in the water, a command which, after several abortive efforts, he succeeded in obeying. As she moistened the forehead and lips of the insensible man she felt a slight quiver stir his frame.

'He is not dead!' she whispered, and now her strength came back.

Antonio laid his hand on the feebly pulsating heart, and, after an instant, repeated:

'He is not dead! Shall we take him to the villa, mademoiselle?'

'Yes—no; that would only be wasting time—there is no doctor there. How far are we from the town?'

'More than a mile, mademoiselle.'

Violet stepped into the carriage.

'Drive on—drive fast!' she said.

What a journey that was—what an endless period those brief moments seemed to cover! Violet sat supporting the heavy, helpless head, unable to move her eyes from the face which showed ashen and rigid in the moonlight. Her presentiment! Was this what the dreadful warning had meant? Killed—

killed under her wheels! George Danvers had ruined this man, and now she was the means of sending him out of the world! By what strange fatality had she and her race proved such a curse to him? Hosts of vague, wild thoughts rushed through her brain—others came—she could exercise no control over her mind; it wandered where it would. Was he dead already? If so, where had it gone—that soul? She stared up at the moon and stars: heaven itself seemed so pitiless, so mocking in its tranquil beauty!

Oh, the time—the time! Would the drive never end—never?

Then Antonio's voice roused her. They had reached the city gates. Antonio leaned down in his seat and said:

'Where are we to go? Does mademoiselle know where the poor gentleman lived?'

Miss Cameron's lips framed a mute negative.

'And it is two o'clock—every place shut—not an hotel would open to let *that* in,' moaned Antonio, emphasising his meaning by a gesture towards the motionless form.

Violet shivered from head to foot in an icy chill; then a thought suggested itself:

no, some power extraneous to her faculties appeared to suggest it.

'Drive to Professor Schimdt's,' she said; 'Via della Scala.'

Doctor Schmidt was an old German physician, retired from practice; a man with a European reputation. She was certain of his being in Florence—they had come from Venice together.

The carriage rolled down the street. What a noise the wheels made on the stones—it sounded like thunder in her ears! All the while she was watching that face; she wanted to look away—she could not! Heavier and heavier grew the weight upon her shoulder; was he dead yet—dead?

Then the landau paused in front of the professor's house. It chanced that the old savant had been reading late; just before the carriage stopped he had opened a window of his study, which was on the ground-floor, and stood looking out. Violet saw him.

'Come—come quick!' she called in German.

The doctor laid his great pipe down upon the window-sill, lifted his spectacles and stared open-mouthed.

'*Ach Gott!* Fräulein Cameron!' he exclaimed.

He hurried out of doors; the instant he caught sight of the face resting on Miss Cameron's shoulder, he cried:

'*Gott in Himmel*—it is Laurence Aylmer! What is this? What is this?'

It required only a brief explanation to make him understand what had happened. Violet gave it clearly enough, in spite of her fright and horror.

'Is he dead?' she whispered.

A moment's dreadful silence, then the professor answered:

'No, not dead. He must be got home. Take him home.'

'I don't know where he lives,' groaned Violet.

'No hotel would receive him—these brutes of Florentines!' added Antonio, who, in his quality of ex-courier, spoke every civilised language like his mother-tongue.

'True, true!' muttered the professor. 'And I have no room. The fools are altering my apartment. I have hardly a place to put my bed.'

'To my house!' cried Violet. 'Get in, professor; we are losing time. Come—come!'

The doctor rushed back into his study, and returned quickly with a square box in his hand.

As the carriage dashed off, Violet heard the coachman croak again like some bird of ill-omen.

'*È fatto di lui!*'

'My poor Laurence!' said the professor. 'He came to see me this very morning.'

'Oh, then you know where he lives?'

'No; he was just changing quarters—agreed to come to-morrow. I knew him well in America—a splendid fellow! To see him like this! *Ach Gott!* but it is of no use lamenting,' he broke off gruffly.

They reached the palace. The porter was still up, and Miss Cameron's maid awaiting her return; every other member of the household had been in bed for hours.

The ground-floor contained a suite of rooms which Violet had fitted up for friends who might chance to stop with her. Was the place in order? she asked. Surely, in perfect order, the porter averred. So the men carried their burthen into the apartment, and laid it on the bed in the sleeping-room; Violet following mechanically.

The professor turned quite fiercely upon her, as his manner was, saying :

'You are to go away, Fräulein ; you are not wanted here.'

'He is not dead ?' again she whispered. 'You are certain ?'

'Plenty of life in him yet—plenty ! There, there, get to your bed ; get to your bed.'

But though he growled out the order and frowned blackly from under his beetle-brows, he led her gently to the door, patting her hand as if she had been a child.

She found her maid waiting above stairs, and dismissed her without mentioning what had happened, unable to bear questionings or feminine lamentations just then.

After a little she went out on the landing again and listened—no sound was audible from below. It seemed to her that she waited a long time ; the suspense became unendurable. She crept down to the entrance-hall and peered into the lodge—it was empty ; probably Giovanni's services had been required. She paused near the door of the apartments in which the injured man lay, then mounted the staircase again, treading as cautiously as though her step could disturb the sufferer.

She paced the antechamber and adjacent salon. An hour elapsed. Her vigil remained unbroken ; but go to her room, even keep still, she could not. She felt so guilty, so wicked ! She recollected her haughty words in the morning, her ill-disguised irritation of the evening, with a shame almost as passionate as remorse. Verily, the trouble presaged by her soul had come, but not of the nature she had dreaded. The omen had been fulfilled, but he was the sufferer. The time dragged on ; yet, though exhausted by fatigue and excitement, she must have news before she tried to sleep.

Through the arched casement, which almost filled one end of the antechamber, grey gleams began to break across a gap in the shutters. Day had come again. She wondered what it would be like, after the awful experience of the night.

At last she heard a sound—the careful opening and closing of a door—then steps on the stairs. Antonio, entering, found himself face to face with his mistress, so pale and wan that her appearance fairly startled him.

'Is it all over?' she asked, in a hoarse whisper.

'No, no, mademoiselle! There is every hope!' he cried eagerly. 'I could not come before. I did not dream that mademoiselle was waiting.'

'I wanted to hear,' she answered, drawing a breath of relief. 'How is he hurt?'

'The left shoulder is dislocated—the blow from the pole did that,' Antonio explained. 'He fell with such force on the back of his head that it has caused concussion of the brain.'

'Then he is insensible!'

'Oh, completely—may stay so for forty-eight hours; but the professor is sure everything will go well,' he added hastily, seeing her shrink. 'Mademoiselle must get to her bed; she will be ill. The doctor remains. I only came up to put out the lamps; I had forgotten them.'

'He will not—not die—the professor is sure?'

'There is every hope,' Antonio asserted, more resolutely than he had warrant for doing. 'The doctor is so skilful—kind, too, though he does speak roughly sometimes! But the thing now is for mademoiselle to get to her bed. Yes, indeed, that is what is imperative!'

Violet found a certain sense of relief in receiving any positive direction. She went away to her room, undressed, and lay down, and, before long, fell into a deep, dreamless slumber.

CHAPTER IV.

A BOUQUET OF JESSAMINES.

Sleep calmed Miss Cameron's nerves sufficiently, so that she was able to appear like her ordinary self.

Clarice brought her Antonio's report. There was no change in the injured man's condition. The professor had gone home, but would return at nine o'clock. Miss Bronson appeared, greatly excited by the news which had reached her—naturally enough eager for particulars of the accident; and, to avoid giving them, Violet hurried her off to an early church service which some saint's day offered.

After the professor had visited his patient, he came upstairs and explained the state of the case. The stupor was the inevitable result of the hurt to the brain, and might last from thirty-six to forty-eight hours. After that, if everything went well, recovery

need not be a long affair. But, hopefully as he tried to speak, Violet could see that he was very anxious.

'And he must stay where he is till cured,' said the professor; 'no removing for him. So make up your mind to it, Fräulein Cameron. Ah, how do you do, Miss Bronson? You look as fresh as a field daisy,' he added, as the spinster entered just in time to hear that closing verdict, which filled her with horror.

Her mind had been sorely disturbed by the remarks of acquaintances she encountered at church; and even her sympathy for suffering paled momentarily before her dread of the reports to which the accident and the stranger gentleman's presence under that roof might give rise.

'Here the poor fellow is, and here he stays!' continued the professor.

'From the way you speak, one would think I wished to send him away,' returned Violet.

'No, no; I am not likely to think that! Still, it is unfortunate,' said Schmidt, rubbing his nose.

'Most unfortunate,' sighed Eliza, as she sank into a chair.

Now the old German and Miss Bronson were antipathetic to one another, and the

instant she echoed his words, Schmidt could not help rejoining :

'Why so, Miss Bronson ?'

'Such talk as there will be—you know Florence !'

'I know the galleries and museums, but I don't know your gossips, if they are what you mean by Florence,' said he.

'Please don't call them *my* gossips,' retorted Eliza, bridling ; 'I think no one—not my worst enemy, if I have an enemy—could accuse me of a taste for such society.'

'I have accused you of nothing ! An enemy—why shouldn't you have one, or twenty, as well as another—tell me that, Miss Bronson ?' cried the professor, triumphantly.

'You said yourself it was unfortunate,' sighed Eliza.

'But I was not thinking of the gossips.'

'Well, one has to think of them ! Oh, they will say dreadful things ! A young gentleman in the house with two lone ladies.'

The professor put his hand to his mouth and made a grimace behind it which Eliza did not catch, but Violet laughed outright.

'We can hardly be called "lone," with such

a troop of servants,' she said. 'Really, Eliza, I don't think we run much risk.'

'I know what will be said, as well as if I had heard it,' replied Eliza, with prophetic voice and mien; 'it will not be the Italians alone, though the Americans and English always do ascribe the slanders to them, I know!' and she began to fan herself with a newspaper which lay on the table, fixing her eyes with mingled sternness and reproach on the physician, as if the whole affair were his fault.

'She would make a splendid model for a picture of Cassandra,' said old Schmidt, taking a pinch of snuff; 'now would she not, Fräulein Cameron?'

'I am not thinking of models or pictures,' returned Eliza, loftily.

'No, no, you make us think of them,' said the provoking savant; 'that is your mission.'

'Come, Eliza, don't be miserable,' added Violet. 'If people abuse me, I will exonerate you from any share of blame. What could I do?'

'Mr. Aylmer has a residence of some kind —somewhere—I *suppose*,' replied Eliza, with withering emphasis.

'But I did not know where, my dear.'

The doctor took snuff and studied Eliza with a slow, German appreciation.

'You will have to endure it,' he said. 'Miss Bronson, your character will be ruined, but you can come out in a new one—that of martyr. You are a religious woman—you believe in the saints, and all the rest of the family! You ought to be thankful that martyrdom is permitted you. The early Christians were eager for it, so their historians say: you must imitate them—imitate them.'

'Professor Schmidt, I do think you are the cruellest man alive!' whimpered Eliza; 'but you might spare me jests on that subject! You may be a materialist; but it is no reason——'

'Wait, wait!' broke in the savant; 'what is a materialist?—do you tell me that first.'

'A man who believes in nothing—like you,' cried Eliza, growing vexed enough to turn upon him.

'Wrong,' said the professor, in a tone of enjoyment, 'entirely wrong! Now, about those early Christians of yours——'

'Do not try to shake *my* faith,' broke in

Eliza; 'you cannot do it. I believe the Bible, and the Apostles' creed, and——'

'And fore-ordination and general damnation, and all the other "ations," ' finished the doctor, while she was taking breath. 'Well, well, don't get excited—it is bad for the digestion. What you call the soul may not be of much consequence, but the stomach is.'

'Violet, it is dreadful to hear him talk so. I wonder you can let him!' moaned Eliza.

'My dear, I grew accustomed to hearing you two quarrel last summer in the Dolomites. I am past being shocked by what either of you can say.'

'Now suppose we take St. Paul,' continued the savant. 'Admit that he wrote the first four of the epistles which bear his name, what have you proved? He made a gross blunder—he said the end of the world was at hand. Now, one of two things: either he was deceiving others, or he deceived himself. Assume the latter to have been the case. You do away with all possibility of his being inspired—you——'

'I won't hear!' shrieked Eliza, and, putting her hands to her ears, she ran out of the room.

The savant looked at Violet with a mingled humour and satisfaction.

'I thought I could find a way to make her leave you in peace,' said he. 'She'll not worry you about her gossips again to-day.'

'I dare say she was right enough in saying that all sorts of nonsensical reports will be spread.'

'I dare say she was. But you don't mean to care?'

'No, of course not.'

'Come,' said the professor, frowning at her with fierce approval; 'you remember what the Englishman, Sydney Smith, said about God and the strawberry? Well, I shall apply it to you. No doubt Nature could have framed a more sensible woman, but I don't believe Nature ever did. And now I am going back to my patient.'

Violet had known the professor for several years, and knew that his heart was on the same scale as his great intellect. He was an old man now, but vigorous as ever in body and mind. He had given up the practice of his profession a long while before, though frequently called upon for advice in difficult cases, and his decisions were regarded almost like those of fate. He was a naturalist as

well as physician, and had written various books, which had been translated into several languages. Unfortunately, these works so clearly proved the unorthodox tenor of his opinions that many people regarded him as a potent emissary of the Evil One. But, whatever he believed or disbelieved, he certainly carried out more thoroughly the chief precept of the Master than any person Violet had ever met, and she had a warm friendship for him. He never attempted to trouble her religious faith, though now and then he could not resist teasing Miss Bronson, for there were times when she irritated him.

'I cannot tell why she should,' he would say, 'and you can't tell why the buzzing of a blue-bottle fly irritates you, but it does.'

Yet he was very good to her; indeed, his acquaintance with the two ladies began by his curing poor Eliza of a severe attack of sciatica, which seized her while sojourning in the Tyrol, and she felt exceedingly grateful to him, though nobody could shudder more profoundly over his heterodoxy. She would as soon have dreamed of robbing a church as reading one of his productions, and was kept in mortal fear by his threats of dedicating to her a volume which he declared himself con-

cocting upon her favourite Apostle, whose name so often sounded as a battle-cry between them.

'Has he gone?' asked the spinster, putting her head in at the door. 'Oh, my dear, when he is doing a kindness he talks more dreadfully than ever! But you are writing; I disturb you.'

'I have finished—only a note to Nina. Please ring the bell; one of the men must ride out to the villa immediately. I did not like to send until I had heard the professor's opinion after his morning visit.'

When the order had been given, Eliza sat down and sighed vigorously.

'So unfortunate,' she repeated; 'so terribly unfortunate!'

'If you want to be unhappy, my dear,' said Violet, 'you must hunt up some less preposterous bugbear, else I can offer you no sympathy. You forget that poor man was hurt in saving me from danger.'

Eliza was silenced and ashamed, but not convinced. She could not help still regarding Violet as a heedless girl, only saved from indiscretions by her companionship; occasionally falling into them in spite of that—witness the present instance. Poor Eliza felt confident

that if she had gone to the villa matters would somehow have been different, and she dwelt upon this idea, notwithstanding its manifest absurdity, until she made herself very wretched.

It was a relief to the spinster when not only the marchese appeared in hot haste, but Nina, though her ankle was so swollen that she had to be carried upstairs.

'Here I am,' she said; 'and a regular old man of the sea you will find me. Carlo says I must not stir for several days.'

'Your presence will be a comfort to Eliza,' replied Violet. 'You are not very correct, but at least you are married, and so will answer as a dragon to protect us two youthful innocents.'

They teased Miss Bronson sadly, not so much for the satisfaction of doing it as to keep from dwelling upon their fears.

Late in the following afternoon Aylmer recovered consciousness, but at first he had no recollection of the accident. The details of the preceding day came back—his adventure in the Cascine—and slowly his mind followed along the track of events till he reached his second meeting with that beautiful woman; but it refused to go further than the moment

when, roused from his reverie by the roadside, he saw her in danger, and sprang up with some vague wild determination to save or die with her.

He passed a comfortable night, and the next morning the autocratic professor allowed Carlo to visit him for a few moments. Aylmer could talk but little; he said something in his slow, difficult speech about the trouble he was in all ways to his good friend. Before Carlo could answer he caught the professor's glance, so comically ferocious that he had much ado not to laugh.

'He wants to fret over my holding him fast in my den,' said the savant, bestowing a second scowl of intelligence on Carlo, who, with Italian quickness, perceived that the doctor had concealed from the patient the fact of his being in Miss Cameron's house lest the knowledge should worry him.

'I am sorry I haven't you out at the villa,' the marchese observed, 'but you couldn't be better off than in the clutches of our ogre.'

'Just so!' returned the professor, nodding his appreciation of the speaker's acquiescence in his wise deception. 'However, it makes no difference what anybody is glad or sorry

about. I propose to have him up very soon, but he has got to belong to me, body and soul —recollect that, young American! And now you have talked more than enough. Magnoletti may take himself off, and don't you so much as wink till I give you leave.

Carlo went back upstairs to give an account of his interview.

'What with Nina established in your drawing-room and poor Aylmer down below —a sister already provided for nurse, and the professor evidently intending to keep his quarters here, I think, Miss Cameron, you had better open the house as a public hospital and be done with it,' he said.

'As it will not be for moral or rather immoral incurables, you will stand no chance of admittance,' returned his wife, 'nor will Giulia da Rimini either.'

'Positively the first time I have heard her name to-day!' cried he.

'She will be here before it ends—see if she is not,' said Nina. 'She has been making eyes at Aylmer ever since he came to Florence.'

'Nonsense, Nina!' and Carlo's voice sounded a little nettled.

'I know it is nonsense, Carlo, for he never

so much as looks at her if he can help it. He does not share your abnormal tastes; he hates black women.'

'He tells you that just because you are a colourless little thing,' retorted Carlo, and received a severe pinch for his impertinence.

Eliza considered the whole conversation improper, and sighed over Violet's fondness for this careless-tongued pair, though she had almost as great a weakness for them herself, in spite of her disapproval of their talk and habits of thought.

Although Miss Cameron's arrival had been so recent that as yet she had paid no visits, the news of the accident afforded people too good an excuse for calling to await such ceremony. Not only many of her friends came, but numerous persons, mostly waifs from the American and English colonies, took that opportunity to try and establish an acquaintance, or at least renew relations with Miss Bronson. Few of the visitors saw Violet, but Eliza appeared and received so many kisses from enthusiastic Anglo-Saxon ladies, that her nose felt quite tender. She related the adventure so often, that she succeeded in giving it with great dramatic effect, and tried so hard to explain how it happened the hero

was lying under Violet's roof, that the simple facts grew into a mystery which would have been enough to ruin the reputation of a dozen ordinary women.

But common rules could not apply to the conduct of a lady so rich as Violet Cameron; whatever she did was well done, from hiding a man in her house to cutting off as many heads as Bluebeard. Women might slander her; might believe and say the most atrocious things as they did of each other, but they would bow down before her all the same and lick the dust at her feet—for it was gold-dust.

'I have told everybody how it came about,' Eliza said triumphantly. 'No one thinks you did wrong, Violet; it is such a relief!'

'How can you keep from strangling her!' cried Nina, when the spinster was again called out of the room. 'Imagine her explanations!'

'I would rather not! But no matter what she says, if she only relieves her feelings. I am very fond of her; it is better she should ruin my reputation than be unhappy.'

Presently a visitor was announced for the marchesa, and into the salon floated Giulia da Rimini—dark, haughty, handsome, Roman-looking, and exquisitely dressed.

'Didn't I tell you she would come!' Nina had time to whisper.

'My dear Miss Cameron—my darling Nina!' cried the duchess, and kissed each in turn. 'I went out to the villa, Nina, and heard you came here yesterday. I feared you were worse and wanted to be near the doctor. My alarm must excuse my rushing in on you, Miss Cameron, in this unceremonious fashion.'

'However brought about, I am of course charmed to receive your visit,' said Violet.

'I only just heard of the accident,' continued the duchess. 'Gherardi was inquiring after Mr. Aylmer as I drove up. What an escape you had, dear Miss Cameron—and the unfortunate young—— Ah, yes, Nina, you are right to frown. It is too dreadful to talk about. But, at least, he is doing well, they tell me?'

'Better than could have been expected,' Nina replied.

The duchess uttered more flattering and pretty speeches, and, after a few moments, bowed herself out.

'Now, why did she come?' questioned Violet.

'Bah!' cried Nina, contemptuously. 'She

had heard of Aylmer's being here. I'd wager my little finger she sees him before she leaves the house.'

'Oh, even she could not go so far!'

'Who lives will see,' said Nina; 'and if I were to live a hundred years, and she too, Giulia could never do anything to astonish me. Mark my words, she will visit Aylmer!'

'They must be on very intimate terms for her to risk such a step,' Violet answered, with a sudden haughty inflection in her voice.

'Nothing of the sort. I tell you, he can't endure her! But let us talk of something else. That woman makes me ill! I have a conviction she will not get through another season without a scandal that must put her out of the pale; and I own I shall not be sorry.'

Other visitors were received, and Nina forgot the duchess and her own prophecy, though it rankled in Violet's mind; and she asked herself why, since neither the lady nor Mr. Aylmer were anything to her, save that he was perforce a guest under her roof. But as this rose from the fact that he had risked his life on her account, to entertain suspicions of him would be very unworthy. Still, she could not help feeling that grati-

tude to a man capable of yielding to Giulia da Rimini's fascinations would seem a galling yoke.

Perhaps an hour later, the professor appeared, having promised to report personally to the two ladies after his next visit to his patient. He entered in great wrath, exclaiming:

'I'll not have this, you know! If I am to cure that fellow, I'll not allow his room to be poisoned by such trash! It must have been one of you sent them! I expected better things of you both.'

As he spoke he flung a bouquet of jessamines on the table between them. Nina stared contemptuously at the flowers for an instant, then burst into peals of laughter, exclaiming:

'Giulia's bouquet! She had it in her belt, and the odour nearly suffocated me. Now, Violet, own I was right!'

'Whose bouquet? What do you say?' growled the professor.

'Never mind,' said Violet, in a voice so cold and odd that Nina glanced at her in surprise, and stopped laughing. 'Please throw those dreadful things out of the window, professor. The smell is sickening.'

'Perfectly so,' added Nina, pretending to arrange her hair, but watching Violet from between her fingers.

The professor opened a window, and flung the flowers away. As he returned, the silence struck him; and he feared that, well as both ladies knew him, and freely as they encouraged his brusque modes of speech, he might this time have annoyed them by his excitement.

'Have I said something to offend you? Don't mind. You know I'm a bear; and I've a horror of flowers in a sick-room,' he said, with a look of comical penitence on his ugly face, which set Nina laughing again.

'Certainly not,' said Violet.

'Only don't suspect us of such crimes,' added Nina. 'We've neither been nor sent to your patient.'

'Very strange!' muttered the doctor. 'The sister saw nobody; but then she had fallen to praying, and when she does that, she wouldn't know if a whole regiment, horse and foot, tramped in!'

'I don't suppose your wretched prisoner accused us,' said Nina.

'He was in no state to tell anything—muttering and gabbling, with his face as

red as fire. No doubt there will be the very deuce to pay!'

'Let us hope the consequences will not prove serious,' said Violet; and while she and the professor talked, Nina sat thinking.

'Is she offended because it was in her house Giulia behaved so? Offended she is! It can't be on the man's account, for she never saw him till the night before last! Well, I'll not tease her; unless she mentions the matter, I shall not.'

When they were left alone, Violet did not make any allusion to the affair; but the next day, out of sheer idleness, Nina began turning over a visiting-list which Violet had been correcting from her old Florentine note-book, and saw a heavy black line drawn across the name—Giulia, Duchess da Rimini.

CHAPTER V.

HER FIRST VISIT.

A WEEK went by. Laurence Aylmer had been very ill since the day the professor found the flowers on his bed. He had managed during the doctor's absence to disarrange his bandages while only partially conscious, and the result was a cold and high fever, which for some time left him no lucid interval.

The old German actually lived in the sick-room, and certain physicians, who did not like him and considered that in taking the case into his hands he had interfered with their rights, since he pretended to be no longer a medical practitioner, declared that in the secrecy of that chamber he was trying all manner of dreadful experiments on the unfortunate man.

Of course these rumours, originating with the doctors, grew into positive and terrible

tales in the mouths of other people, and one energetic old maid from Columbia gave a 'tea' for the express purpose of expounding her views in regard to the matter. She thought the American ladies ought to interfere in behalf of their countryman, barbarously tortured, nay, slowly murdered, under the hands of this heartless German savant, who, to use the energetic female's own words, 'was capable of sacrificing hecatombs of humanity in pursuit of what he termed the cause of science.' She proposed appointing a committee to wait upon the professor, and tell him plainly that unless he would consent to call a consultation of physicians, they, the countrywomen of this luckless gentleman, must appeal to the American Minister in Rome, publish letters in the *Tourist*—call heaven and earth to witness their protest against conduct which was a disgrace to the latter half of our glorious century.

Many speeches were made, and a great deal of tea and orgeat drunk, but though numerous plans of action were discussed, even to an assault upon the palace and a rescuing bodily of the victim by the Amazons—a proposal which originated with a tiny withered spinster, who, in spite of her size, appeared as

determined as if animated by the spirit of Penthesilea—still the meeting proved a failure, so far as carrying any of the projects into execution went.

Poor Eliza Bronson heard all the news, and, with bitter tears and mournful wails, warned her friend, and was driven nearly frantic by the laughter of Violet and Nina, who at once informed the professor, and that reckless person laughed far louder than they.

Nina remained Miss Cameron's guest. Some little imprudence had inflamed her ankle again, and the professor condemned her to another week of repose, threatening to keep her in a supine position for the next three months if she did not obey.

Carlo came and went. A knot of Nina's intimate friends were a great deal at the house, so the little lady had amusement ; and Violet, still beset by that inexplicable dislike for solitude and reflection, seemed as eager for society as Nina herself.

Both good taste and sympathy caused the ladies to refrain from anything which could come under the head of gaieties, though of course outsiders declared that ' revellings and orgies went on in the palace, while the professor's victim groaned under the same roof,

helpless in the octopus clutches of his Teutonic tormentor'—a fine phrase which was conceived and uttered by the virgin who had proposed an onslaught of Amazons on behalf of the martyr. True, these reports of unseemly revels were contradicted by other tales, that Miss Cameron had been secretly married to the sufferer, that he was not in the house, not living even, and that the professor was essaying some new mode of embalming. But in Florence it is not difficult for people to believe a dozen stories, diametrically opposed to each other, at one and the same time, and it had been long since the various coteries had found a common subject of interest so engrossing and so dramatic.

On the eighth day Aylmer was better, and Violet went that evening to a concert given by some young aspirant for fame, where the appearance of influential persons would be even more important than their money. She had not before spent the evening abroad, and hesitated about leaving Nina to Miss Bronson's society, which the little lady did not fully appreciate—Carlo being absent on a visit to an estate he owned near Perugia. However, Nina declared that if her hostess stopped at home she would render herself

odious, and pleaded so hard with her to go, that Violet changed her mind at the last moment, and accompanied some friends who called for her.

Midnight had struck when she returned. As she was mounting the stairs, the professor looked out of the apartment on the ground-floor and called to her.

'Can I speak to you a moment?' he inquired.

'Of course,' Violet said; and bade Antonio go on and tell Clarice not to wait up any longer. She saw the professor appeared worried, and asked quickly, 'Nothing wrong? He—your patient is not worse?'

'Not seriously worse, perhaps; but the fever has come back, and he has no business to have fever,' returned the professor, in an injured tone. 'The obstinacy of human nature is really something stupendous! But come in and sit with me, please. Miss Bronson is doubtless asleep, and so can't be shocked at the impropriety of your visiting a gay Lothario of sixty-seven at this late hour. I have sent the sister to lie down for awhile.'

Violet laughed and yielded to his whim, as she fancied it.

Beyond the salon they entered was a second; then came the room where Aylmer lay; at the side of this, one in which a bed had been arranged for the professor whenever he chose to remain.

The doors were open, and Violet could hear the murmur of a voice from the sick man's chamber.

'Who is talking to him?' she asked, in urprise.

'Why, that's himself; he's been at it for the last half-hour—mutter, mutter!' growled he professor. 'He gabbles about seeing the carriage on the brink of the river. If I rouse him he answers sanely enough, but in a moment begins to wander again—talking about a garden—places in America—Lord knows what! I thought you wouldn't mind going in for a little; perhaps your voice would quiet him. In that sort of partial delirium sometimes a mere trifle will compose a patient, if it happens to fall in with his delusion.'

'I will do so, of course,' Violet answered; 'but are you sure that seeing me will not agitate him still more? We are such entire strangers——'

She paused abruptly, her utterance checked

by a thought engrossing as it was sudden. Strangers? Why, it seemed as if they had known one another for years! Then she began hastily to account for this sensation: it rose from the fact that his accident had been caused by his efforts in her behalf; from his having lain for so many days under her roof; from—but the professor was speaking, and she had no leisure to listen to her own absurd imaginings, or seek solutions thereof.

'That's just it—you mustn't startle him. You are a woman of brains—*ach Gott!* what a different world it would be if there were more of your sort! You can comprehend what I want. You must wait till he begins again about a lady, and flowers, and all that nonsense; then sit down by him—enter into his delusion, so you will be a part of it—you see?'

'Yes,' Violet replied, and her voice sounded cold.

The professor's mention of the jessamines brought to her mind that rather stern criticism of the wounded man which she had indulged whenever she recollected Giulia da Rimini's visit. The savant had evidently forgotten his own outbreak and the reason

of his annoyance. She had time to be glad of this obliviousness on his part, to wonder why she was glad. Then he spoke again, and all the while, through the swift rush of her fancies, through the effort to listen to her companion's words, she could hear the sound of that painful voice from the sick-room, monotonous, low, yet eager and troubled.

'Of course you understand,' the professor continued approvingly; 'one is always sure you can—that is the pleasure of dealing with a woman like you! Come now, stand where he can't see you till the right moment, then go in. You can quiet him—you must! I don't wish to give any narcotics; I depend on you.'

He shook his head fiercely at her, and, in his earnestness, seized her loose sleeve, quite unconscious of his rudeness, and hurried her through the adjoining salon to the chamber beyond.

Violet stood still upon the threshold and looked in; a large, lofty room, whose vaulted roof added to the sense of space and height, decorated, like the rest of the suite, with furniture old as the palace itself. A lamp burning upon a table formed an island of light in the centre of the chamber, and cast

faint rays across the carved bedstead and damask canopy. At first Miss Cameron could distinguish nothing; she closed her eyes for a few seconds. When she opened them, gradually the different objects became visible. A bronze Moor, holding a candelabra, frowned at her near the door; farther on, a marble nymph peeped out of a niche, with a flower-vase in her hand; the single-lighted candle of the Moor's burthen struck her face. She seemed to bestow a smirk on the African, and cast an evil glance at Violet from the corners of her dead eyes.

The island of light in the middle of the room grew brighter; Miss Cameron could see the bed distinctly. The curtains were flung back, the sick man lay motionless; she caught the feverish glitter of his eyes, the worn outline of his countenance, and the words he uttered in that weary, monotonous voice were perfectly audible.

'She promised to come—she promised! I am so tired. I shall never be done counting them—she promised!'

The professor, standing behind Violet, touched her shoulder in sign that she was to go forward. She stepped softly across the floor and sat down by the bed. The sufferer

saw her, stretched out his hand aimlessly, saying:

'I thought you had gone away! Don't go! I can smell the flowers now! Ah, you have taken me into the garden. I was so tired of that room; it is cool and pleasant here.'

His wandering hand rested upon hers—he held it fast; his eyes closed; a smile parted his lips; he lay silent for some minutes. The professor crept back into the adjoining room. Violet did not stir.

Presently Aylmer looked at her again.

'It was very good of you to come,' he said; 'I wanted you so much.'

Did he know what he was saying? He spoke so composedly that for an instant Violet thought him quite rational, but his next words proved her mistake. 'I saw the flowers—I knew when you came in—I wanted to speak—to ask you to stay! Then you were gone, and the flowers were gone too; the Moor stole them—he steals everything you send! But you have come back now; you have come back!'

He fancied that Giulia da Rimini had returned! He lifted her fingers to his lips; a thrill of disgust shook Violet; she felt

degraded—he mistook her for that woman! She snatched her hand away.

'Don't go,' he moaned; 'don't leave me!'

Violet looked up and saw the professor in the doorway; he made a warning signal. She must not shrink; she must humour the sick man's odious fancy; repose might be of vital necessity. Whatever he was; however wicked, she could not refuse her aid. She let him take her hand again.

'You will stay!' he said. She did not answer. 'She won't speak; she won't speak!' he murmured complainingly.

'I am here—I will stay,' she whispered, though the words seemed to choke her, and the touch of his fingers burned like fire. He talked brokenly on, each disconnected phrase only bringing additional proof that her angry disgust was deserved.

'Are you here—are you here? Don't you remember that night? I want to tell you! I hate that Moor—the old man said he was your husband! They are all gone now! Yes, say it over—say it over!'

And so he fell asleep with a smile on his lips, still holding her hand fast. She dared not stir, for fear of disturbing him; and the horror, the sense of degradation, and mingled

therewith a sting of disappointment and pain, as if this stranger had been long and well known, and she had suddenly learned how she had deceived herself in regard to him, growing each instant stronger. It was all odious, dreadful!

At last he turned slightly on his pillow, and his fingers relaxed their grasp; she drew hers away, rose, and went noiselessly out of the room, shuddering from head to foot as if she had escaped from something noisome, yet still with that sensation of pain and regret—at what? Ah, the question was impossible to answer!

'It has succeeded admirably,' the professor said, as he followed her into the farther salon. 'He will sleep for hours; you managed perfectly! A quiet night, and I shall be at ease about him. Yes, yes, we are on the right road now.'

Violet did not reply; she felt giddy and faint. She saw a carafe of water on the table, filled a glass and drank eagerly.

'You are tired; you look pale,' said the professor, frowning at her from under his bushy eyebrows. 'Come; you have done enough for this time; go you to bed.'

'Good-night,' she said.

'I shall give you my arm up the stairs——'

'Good heavens! because you have two patients in the house, don't think I must be ill too,' she interrupted, with a fretfulness which she could not repress.

'Tut, tut! don't contradict me!' cried the professor. 'When I say I shall do a thing, I always do it! I mean to give you my arm up the stairs.'

Violet accepted his courtesy, just to avoid further words.

'I am well satisfied,' continued the professor. 'To-morrow our patient shall begin a new life. Fräulein, you are a very sensible person.'

'I am not; and if I could be, I wouldn't!' exclaimed Violet, and then began to laugh, though she was shivering still.

'You are nervous,' pursued the professor, with a little disdain audible in his voice. 'It is an odd thing that, though women can sometimes be efficient in a crisis, their nerves always suffer for it.'

'A man's opinion!' retorted Violet. 'You may be wisdom incarnate, but you will never understand women, professor; so you may as well give up the effort.'

'God forbid that I should lose my time making it!' said he, with pious fervour.

They passed through the entrance-hall, and up the stairs; the professor jesting and laughing in his slow, ponderous fashion—Violet trying to laugh and speak gaily in reply.

In the vast antechamber—large enough to hold a modern house—they saw Antonio, the trustworthy, fast asleep on a mediæval settle, as hard and uncomfortable as it was picturesque and valuable.

'I can't believe in your dreadful theories that men have been evolved from apes, but I can believe the vital principle in that faithful creature has been in a Newfoundland dog,' said Violet.

She dropped the professor's arm, and was about to wake Antonio, when an exclamation from the savant checked her.

'Ten thousand devils!' he growled; but the surprise in his voice formed an excuse for the ejaculation.

Violet's eyes followed his gesture. In the doorway of the salon a human head appeared, wrapped in a scarlet shawl. Two wild orbs glared at the pair for an instant, then the vision vanished.

Repeating his unseemly outburst, the pro-

fessor rushed forward, and Violet hurried after.

In an easy-chair sat Eliza Bronson, her head wrapped in the red shawl; her right hand uplifted, and grasping an empty phial.

'I have poisoned myself,' she said, in a voice where diverse emotions found vent—fear and a sort of reproachful triumph being pre-eminent.

'Great heavens!' cried Violet. 'What do you mean?'

'I—have — poisoned — myself,' repeated Eliza, separating the words by pauses, in order to give them increased emphasis.

The doctor darted upon the phial, seized it, smelled it, and exclaimed:

'If you dare to have hysterics, I'll let you die, as sure as my name is Schmidt!'

'Violet, perhaps *you* will listen to my last words,' said Eliza, bestowing a glance of scorn upon the professor.

'Now, what do you think you have taken?' asked he.

'I know! Madame Magnoletti's liniment! You ought to be aware of its contents. It was your prescription,' said Eliza.

'I mean, what antidote?'

'Everything! It is too late! The white

of an egg—but that is for arsenic! Some cold tea—no matter! Oh, Violet, you were down in that man's room! I heard you. Do not deny it!'

'Then why didn't you come after us?' cried the professor.

'Sir,' said she, 'I can die, but I cannot be indelicate!'

The professor smelled at the bottle again. Something in his face assured Violet that Miss Bronson's fears were uncalled for, but the professor's words were not reassuring.

'Why did you take poison?' he asked.

'I had a frightful neuralgia. I caught up the phial, and swallowed the contents, thinking it was my mixture. The instant I had done so I perceived my error. I looked at the bottle,' continued Eliza, in an awful tone. 'I recognised it as that which held the marchesa's liniment, though how it came in my room I know not.'

Violet regarded the professor. His face remained inscrutable as that of the Sphynx. Eliza leaned back in her chair, and gasped in majestic resignation.

'Salt and water,' pronounced the professor, meditatively.

'I have taken a pint!' cried she, triumphantly.

'Then in a few moments you will be very sick,' said he; 'at least, I hope so. If not, we will think of some other remedy; but you have drunk as good a simple antidote as any. We must wait a little.'

Eliza turned her back upon him.

'Violet,' she said, 'it is a solemn thought that before dawn breaks I may be where I shall hear the cherubs sing.'

'Terrible, if they scream like human cherubs,' said the professor. 'Why, you might as well talk about fairies as such personages! Miss Bronson, you will be resolved into the elements — so much hydrogen, so much oxygen——'

'Peace, railer!' broke in Eliza.

'I suppose you would object to—to—afterward—I mean—to autopsy,' said the professor, in an insinuating tone, waving his right hand in the air, as fancying that it held a scalpel.

'Violet, do you hear?—and I still living! In my very hearing he proposes that sacrilege!' moaned Eliza.

'My dear professor, do tell her that she is not poisoned,' said Violet, appealingly.

He held out the bottle in answer, with a look so tragic that Eliza began to realise the reality of what she was rather playing at,

yet from first to last had been in earnest about—and though this is a very unintelligible sentence, no other language would express her feelings.

'Do not ask him to deceive me,' sobbed she.

'No, no,' said the professor. 'But later, when it's all over, when your so-called self is resolved into the elements——'

'Heathen!' groaned Eliza, drying her eyes. A petition for him to make some further essay of skill had been upon her lips, but his heretical speech roused her wrath and brought back her courage.

'After that,' pursued the professor, unmoved and deaf, 'would you permit, in the cause of science, that autopsy——'

Eliza interrupted him by a shriek.

'I'll not be autop—top—there's no such word as autopticised,' she cried, with her school-teaching instincts strong upon her even then. 'But I mean, whatever the word to express it may be, that my lifeless frame shall not become the victim of your sacrilegious experiments. Unless my friend—she whom I have called my friend—will promise, I leave her house this instant. There must be some roof beneath which my corse can lie safe from your nefarious designs.'

'Schnapps!' exclaimed the professor so abruptly and with such energy that he startled Violet even; as for Eliza, she bounded in her chair as if she had been electrified.

'What?' she shrieked, not catching the word, and afraid he had pronounced some dreadful sentence of doom.

'A sure remedy. I never thought of it till now. Wait, I'll be back in a minute!' and away rushed the professor.

Eliza rolled her head and winked her eyes. This sudden excitement on the professor's part made her certain she was in bad case indeed.

'Violet,' she said faintly, 'think how it would be with me if at a moment like this I had not a sure faith, a certainty of being among the elect, to give me support.'

Whatever the dose she had swallowed, it had evidently affected Eliza's brain. Violet hastened into the anteroom when she heard the old German's step.

'In the name of goodness, what has the poor creature taken?' she asked, meeting the professor with a square bottle under his arm.

'Nothing of consequence,' he answered. 'There was laudanum in it; you know even

a few drops affect her. The dose has gone to her head, and now I propose to send a glass of Schnapps after it; then she will go to bed and sleep like a top.'

'And—and your patient?' Violet asked hesitatingly.

'Oh, he is still sound—likely to stay so. The sister is sitting by him,' said the professor. 'At present, our duty is towards your friend Elizabeth—Eliza, or whatever—and do our duty we must.' He hurried into the salon, crying, 'Here we are! This is the little fat gentleman that means to save your life, my Miss Bronson;' and he brandished the square bottle before the spinster's eyes.

'What is he giving me?' moaned Eliza, sleepily. 'Violet, I feel a strange drowsiness, I see double. Oh! oh! it is the end!'

'*Dominus vobiscum*,' chanted the professor, in a deep bass voice, as he began to pour the sparkling liquid into a goblet.

'Do go away,' said Violet, and took the bottle from him, concealing her face so that Eliza might not be shocked or hurt by her irrepressible laughter.

She mixed a little of the spirits with a judicious quantity of water and gave it to

the spinster, who drank, and in a few moments grew both courageous and dizzy.

'Sir, you have saved my life,' she said, turning towards the professor with majesty tempered by tenderness, while the old sinner stood looking at her and rubbing his hands in glee; 'you have saved my life—I thank you! I abhor your principles, I repudiate your doctrines, but I am grateful for your care.'

'Good!' chuckled the professor; 'schnapps for ever!'

'Violet,' continued Eliza, 'I love you, but I shudder over your future! I warn you now that if you linger in this unhallowed land, and if you do not relinquish Mariolatry, you will lose your soul—lose your soul. *His*,' and she pointed a finger of dreadful warning at the professor, '*his* is lost already.'

She disappeared; went straight to her room, and, as the professor had prophesied, slept sweetly till morning.

CHAPTER VI.

LA BELLE SAMARITAINE.

Only the next day Giulia da Rimini again presented herself.

Miss Cameron was seated with Nina in the salon she had appropriated to her guest, and, as ill-luck would have it, Carlo had entered a few moments before.

Nina had a headache, and Violet was bathing her forehead with eau-de-Cologne, when her maid brought in the duchess's card. The marchesa made a little grimace as she read the name, and handed the bit of coronetted pasteboard to her friend, whispering :

'One must receive her !'

'The visit is for you,' Violet answered in the same tone, rising as she spoke ; 'there is no reason why I should stop. She does not come to see me—I have not returned her call.'

But Nina caught her dress and pulled her down upon the sofa again, with an eager, supplicating look, while her lips inaudibly framed the entreaty :

'Stay—do stay !'

'What are you two talking about ?' called Carlo from the table, where he sat trying some combination of cards ; 'who is your visitor ?'

'He will go away with her if we don't let her come up,' Nina murmured rapidly. 'If you vex her, she will punish me. Wait till I am gone before you take any decisive step.'

Violet stared in astonishment, but the tears in the little woman's eyes softened her, and she bowed acquiescence.

'Have you both lost your tongues ?' asked the marchese.

Violet treated him to a contemptuous glance which escaped his short sight, but Nina caught it and muttered :

'Oh, don't !' Then she added aloud to her maid, 'Tell madame I am not well this morning, but I will see her.'

'What madame ?' demanded the persistent Carlo.

'The Duchess da Rimini ! As you hate

women's gossip you had better run away,' said Violet, quite savagely.

Carlo laughed, put up his glass, glanced at the speaker, and then at Nina.

'Heaven help us!' cried he; 'how have I offended you, Miss Cameron? You snubbed me in such a wife-like tone that I had to look twice to be certain it was not my legal guardian who spoke.'

'Your legal guardian is more amiable than I,' returned Violet, affecting to laugh, for Nina's eyes, full of supplication, were still upon her; 'I am in one of my bad moods, when anything in the shape of a question irritates me.'

'Carlo,' said Nina, speaking so gaily that Violet wondered at her self-control, 'if you know any one of her admirers who means to risk his fate to-day, pray warn him not to venture.'

'It would only be Christian charity,' he replied, let his lorgnon drop, and went back to his cards.

If there had been, as Violet fancied, a little suspicion in his face, it died out when Nina spoke in that natural way, accompanying her words with one of her childish bursts of laughter.

'So,' thought Violet, 'Master Carlo has teased her, has he? Well, he never shall again, on that woman's account! Make your visit, madame the duchess! I never expected to be glad to see you; but this time I am—I am indeed!'

She rose, went over to the table and stood behind the marchese's chair, apparently absorbed in the cards spread out upon the cloth, and asking some question in regard to them.

Madame da Rimini was announced, and swept into the room with her customary slow, majestic tread.

'My poor Nina—my dearest Nina! Still tied fast to that odious sofa! Heavens, it is too cruel!' she cried, moving towards the couch.

There was the sound of a kiss; Nina had leisure to respond, and the duchess to utter more sweet, condoling words, before Violet gave any sign of having observed the visitor's entrance or moved so as to permit Carlo to rise. She turned; the duchess was regarding her, endeavouring to look as if now she had leisure to see Miss Cameron, but with another expression visible in her face, try as she might to hide it, a certain wondering

fear if it were possible a slight could befall *her.*

Violet made a low obeisance; but in spite of her gracious manner, no woman could have failed to understand her hostile intentions.

'*Si matinale et si belle, madame la duchesse!*' she cried. 'How good of you to come so often to see the marchesa in her imprisonment! You are a true sister of charity in your kindness to the wounded and suffering.'

A faint quiver disturbed the duchess's firm mouth, but almost imperceptible as it was, Nina caught it. She waited in a thrill of pleasurable expectation. Violet meant to deal the odious creature some cruel blow, and Violet would do it neatly and well—the Russian could trust her.

But though the duchess feared that her little secret had been discovered, she did not intend to be stabbed by this impertinent American, if her well-trained skill could parry the thrust.

'A visit to so old and valued a friend as the marchesa could scarcely come under that head, *chère demoiselle*,' she replied, with a supercilious little smile which put Violet

outside the pale of such intimacy as pointedly as words could have done.

The two women of course understood her meaning, but it was Greek to Carlo in his masculine dulness, though he perceived that matters were not going smoothly between the duchess and Violet. He glanced from one to the other, then stole a furtive look at his wife; but Nina, busy arranging her cushions, appeared as innocent as a dove.

'No matter what head her visit comes under, I can't see what I have done that the duchess should refuse to notice me,' he said hastily, moving forward as he spoke.

'Ah, are you there, marchese?' returned she in her indolent voice, vouchsafing him a glance very different from that which she had bestowed upon Violet. Sunshine was not softer than the smile he received; a lance not sharper than the look shot at Miss Cameron. She sank into a seat and extended him the tips of her daintily-gloved fingers, which he kissed in his graceful Italian fashion.

'And what news of the match?' she asked eagerly. 'Is it to come off or not?'

'Yes; I believe it is decided for Saturday.'

'What match?' Nina inquired.

'Between Marco Goldoni's horse and one of Harry Stanhope's,' Carlo explained.

'And I have dozens and dozens of gloves on it,' cried the duchess, in the same pretty, eager way. 'Marchese, do tell me that Marco's grey will win!'

But, interested as she appeared, Nina knew she had rushed into the subject merely to hinder Miss Cameron from speaking. The little woman chafed inwardly that the thrust she felt confident Violet had meant to deal should be so easily prevented, and for Carlo to have aided the duchess, even unintentionally, doubled Nina's annoyance.

During some moments the trotting-match was enthusiastically talked of; Nina took her share in the conversation, but Violet sat aloof, the visitor's own words giving her the right to consider that she had no more to do with playing hostess than if she had met the lady under the marchesa's roof.

Now, if Giulia had left matters on this footing, she might perhaps have rendered it impossible for Miss Cameron to hit her with a buttonless foil; but that lady's courteous, yet palpable negation of any concern in her visit, irritated the Sicilian beyond endurance, and urged her imprudently on to be the assailant in a second clashing of swords, convinced that if the American had been cognizant of her

little escapade, she would have betrayed the fact on their first encounter.

Unfortunately for Giulia she did not understand Violet, and rushed on her fate—that of being exposed before Carlo. Some remark of Miss Cameron's, in answer to a question from Nina, afforded the duchess a delightful opportunity to sneer at America and the freedom granted unmarried women in that country.

'It seems odd to us Latins,' said she in her sweetest voice, and one must have heard an Italian utter a *méchanceté* to form an idea of the exquisite perfection of tone and manner, 'but we are so antiquated, so prejudiced, so ignorant, we European women, compared with the dazzling transatlantic beauties!' She addressed Nina, but by an indescribable something, for she made no gesture, rendered the compliment to American women a tribute of special admiration and delicate mockery to Violet Cameron herself. 'How one envies the brilliant creatures! One might admit their supremacy in point of loveliness and wit, and still be patient, but it is the liberty allowed them which irks us, held in bondage by tiresome old customs.'

'Yes, yes,' cried Nina, just to push Giulia

forward to her doom, ready, Russian-like, to enjoy her enemy's defeat the more from having feared that it would fail. 'You are right, duchess; but still, would such freedom suit our ideas?'

'Ah, that is the question! I am afraid we glory in our slavery to custom; it is ingrained in our natures. Still, one envies the Americans all the same! One would like to hate them, but, being women, we appreciate their fascinations too thoroughly to do that.'

'Upon my word, Fleur Violette, that pretty speech deserves your best courtesy,' cried Carlo, really believing that the duchess desired to be especially agreeable.

'Oh, a man!' was Nina's thought.

'But, duchess,' asked Violet, 'what do you so particularly envy us Americans?'

'I have said—the freedom granted our sex in your native land.'

'Surely, once married, an Italian woman is free enough,' said Violet; and the duchess saw her own error, but could not remedy it.

'When freedom comes too late!' sighed she, hoping to silence Violet by the difficulty of finding any answer with a sting in it which would not appear a rudeness.

'How?' exclaimed Miss Cameron. 'Freedom cannot come too late!'

Giulia shook her stately head, saying:

'Ah, Nina darling, mademoiselle argues as an unmarried lady naturally would! She does not know those dreadful tyrants as we do,' waving two fingers towards Carlo, and giving him a smile, as she spoke.

'Oh,' said Carlo, 'Miss Cameron is a cruel, icy-hearted creature, utterly indifferent even to attractions like mine.'

'There may be a reason for that,' laughed the duchess. 'You must not forget the interesting invalid below stairs! By the way, how is Mr. Aylmer this morning?'

'Better,' said Nina and Carlo, speaking at once.

'Better,' repeated Violet, laughing gaily as she spoke. 'But take care, duchess, that you content yourself with inquiring here! That cross old professor is lying in wait! Oh, if you had seen him the other day dash up here, and shake your pretty bunch of jessamines in our faces, accusing us of trying to poison his patient, when Nina could not leave her sofa, and I could not dream of intruding into the lion's den, being an American woman in a foreign land—and unmarried!'

Blush? Yes, the duchess did, through all her rouge! Carlo gave her one furious glance, and began to rearrange his cards; Nina nursed her foot, in order to hide her face, conscious that its triumph would not bear exposure; Violet sat calm as a summer morning.

'Marchese,' she added, 'did I not tell you the duchess was a good Samaritan? But, alas, in our century Samaritans meet with a poor reward! The professor still vows that her kind visit to Mr. Aylmer retarded his recovery by at least a fortnight.'

The duchess—not quick-witted, though shrewd—tried to laugh; Carlo made a still more miserable pretence at merriment; Nina remained occupied with her foot; Violet's smiling serenity knew no change.

'Warning!' cried Carlo, somewhat too bitterly. 'Don't play the Samaritan—one is not appreciated.'

'Don't be found out, you mean, else the professors fall upon you,' Miss Cameron gaily amended, with a glance at the duchess which sent the Sicilian's blood up to boiling-heat.

Before any additional words could be spoken by either of the group, Antonio announced fresh visitors—witty Lady Harcourt, bring-

ing in her train Gherardi, Harry Stanhope, and several other men.

'I knew if we sent up our names we should not be admitted,' cried her ladyship. 'So I persuaded these cowards to help me storm the citadel.'

There followed a torrent of merry talk. In the midst of it, after trying unsuccessfully to take a part, appear at ease, and at the same time soften Carlo by sundry beseeching glances, to which he, obdurate as a Trojan, paid no attention, Madame da Rimini rose.

'Going to leave poor Nina already?' questioned Violet, sweetly.

The duchess turned on her. The enamel of politeness cracked in the heat of her wrath, and gave a glimpse of the coarse virago under.

'I have a thousand things to do,' she replied; and her voice was so sharp that everybody looked up, but she struggled in vain to subdue nature. 'I shall come again when I may be of some use to my friend.'

'*Samaritaine toujours*,' said Violet, and that wretched Carlo laughed, looking full in the duchess's face the while.

The luckless Giulia stood dumb for an instant.

'Stanhope,' said Carlo, 'give madame your

arm to her carriage; but take Paulo with you to protect her from your fascinations, and to make Lady Harcourt and my wife say bitter things of her, out of sheer jealousy, on account of her cavaliers.'

Now the Englishman was elderly and unimpressionable, and Paulo was the duchess's own brother-in-law, whom she hated with a hatred surpassing even that of women.

Nina metaphorically flapped the wings of her soul in delight, but poor Carlo was only a man, and hastened to impair the perfect retribution he had brought about.

'I am master of the house for the nonce,' he added, 'and cannot leave Miss Cameron exposed to the wiles and enormities of these other male monsters.'

'Oh, you goose!' Nina mentally groaned.

The duchess, so pale with anger that the spots of rouge showed like a blotch on either cheek, seized the advantage given by Carlo's superfluous words.

'Miss Cameron will lend you to me to the foot of the stairs,' said she. 'I am afraid of the dangerous Colonel, and Paulo came on purpose to make love to Nina. You can't in decency refuse him three minutes free from your Argus eyes.'

'*Mille diables!* she has the best of it after all!' thought the little Russian.

But the Muscovite reckoned defeat without taking into consideration the American reserve, bent on punishing the offender to the uttermost.

'Go, Carlo, my friend,' said Violet; 'see the duchess safe to her carriage. The professor lies in wait for her, and if she so much as looks towards the door of the den where he is torturing his victim, he will fall upon her.'

'What, what!' cried Lady Harcourt. 'Giulia, have you been trying to prevent that New World barbarian from dying in peace?'

'On the contrary,' said Violet, quick as a flash, 'she went in the other day and laid sweet jessamines on his pillow, and the professor nearly murdered Nina and poor me, just because we were women too, and the offender —*la belle Samaritaine*—had escaped, and he found only us innocents to visit his wrath upon.'

In many circles the bit of comedy might have been wasted, but these types of Florentine society appreciated the scene as thoroughly as ever a knot of Parisian critics

enjoyed the most delicately-drawn exhibition of character in one of Victorien Sardou's plays.

The duchess knew it, and the *réplique* rested with her. To remain silent would be to damn herself. Florence might pass over impropriety, but not stupidity. And, difficult as the situation was in itself, her fierce anger increased its difficulties. But she must answer. She could be coarse if wit failed; at least the men would believe what she said witty, just on account of its coarseness.

'I am not afraid of your professor,' said she; 'I have already appeased him. I agreed to give Carlo up to you, dear Miss Cameron, and to let Nina have the American.' But the quizzical glances directed towards her drove her on to add: 'To ratify the bargain, the professor is to sup with me on Sunday night. Will you all come? Lady Harcourt, promise in the general name.'

'I promise,' returned my lady, 'promise for all. We shall not forget.'

'*Au revoir*, dear,' said the duchess, and kissed Violet's cheek.

She floated out on the marchese's arm, and the instant the door closed Lady Harcourt exclaimed:

'I don't understand the *mot* of the charade, but, great heavens! Violet Cameron, you must have hit her hard when she was pushed to the extreme of giving a supper!'

'Don't understand the *mot!*' cried Gherardi. 'Well, I fancy poor Aylmer would——'

'Hush!' broke in her ladyship. 'We may be scandalous in Florence, but a sick man's room and his female visitors are sacred—silence, evil tongue!'

Going downstairs, the duchess for a little talked any nonsense that would come into her head, just to give it time to stop whirling, then wondered quickly what explanation would be best, or rather least hurtful to her cause, and ended by ignoring the matter.'

'Oh, marchese,' she said, 'I have to go to that dreadful railway man about the dividends; can't you be good natured, and bully him for me?'

'I could have done so last week,' retorted he; 'but Gresham and I quarrelled yesterday. I only know one person who could soften him, that's Aylmer—but he is too ill.'

The speech was not bad for a man's effort, but it gave the duchess a chance.

'Cruel!' she cried, released his arm, and

drooped into an attitude of dignified melancholy. 'You could hear me insulted—you can try to wound me after!'

'The odour of jessamine always turns my stomach,' said Carlo.

'Then luckily I did not find you that day,' exclaimed the duchess, with a burst of truthfulness wonderfully well done. 'I did go into the creature's room. The doors were open—I thought I heard your voice. I wanted to tell you I was sorry for having teased you that last evening. But you were not there. I ran out—the bouquet must have fallen from my corsage. Oh, that wretched, malicious woman!'

Carlo waited calmly till she had finished, then extended his arm anew, saying only:

'Shall I tell your people to drive to Gresham's office?'

The duchess shut her lips hard, to keep from panting, like a person who had mounted a steep hill too fast. Carlo put her hand in his arm and led her on.

'Where to?' he asked, as they reached the court.

'Home,' she answered faintly; then, making a violent effort to recover herself and speak playfully, she added, 'If you like

to come, I'll give you some punch, instead of English four o'clock tea.'

'I am heart-broken; but I promised to sit awhile with poor Aylmer,' returned he, and helped her into the carriage.

From a window which overlooked the courtyard, that malicious Gherardi watched the pair and cried, utterly regardless of the marchesa's presence:

'He goes—he does not go! Which side do you take, Lady Harcourt; and how many pairs of gloves upon it?'

'He goes!' exclaimed Stanhope. 'Fifty pounds to ten!'

'You have lost,' said Lady Harcourt, who had reached the window; 'and you are fitly punished for speaking!'

Everybody was gone at last; the marchesa and Violet were alone.

'You angel!' cried Nina; 'but oh, you have made a terrible enemy—Sicilian—take care!'

'*Che!*' returned Violet, with an accent perfectly Italian and a disregard of consequences purely Anglo-Saxon.

'I had been a little jealous, I will admit now,' pursued Nina; 'it was the first time—it will be the last where Giulia is concerned!

My dear, Carlo will never forgive the blow to his vanity: she had written him a letter only that morning.'

'He cared nothing for her; you cannot think he did!'

'No, no; not in earnest—but he is a man! However, it is ended, thanks to you. If ever I can repay you, I vow—no, I won't, for women always break their oaths.'

'Don't repeat that stale old slander,' said Violet; 'not women, only the make-believes.'

'But I love you! Let me hug you, this instant! I never was troubled about him before; though, if I repeat that so often, you will not believe me. Well, you have cured him! Oh, the cat! she will never dupe him now—but you—you—oh, my dear!'

'Bah!' said Violet; 'did Giulia da Rimini suppose she was a match for us? Let her try to punish me—we shall see! In the meantime, my love, we will have some tea, just to get the taste of her name out of our mouths.'

CHAPTER VII.

DEAD AS PHARAOH.

Miss Cameron did not like to think of her visit to the sick-room, for each time she did so the circumstances connected therewith seemed to increase in significance. Many of her sex would have contented themselves with expending censure on the duchess, but this was contrary to Violet's creed, which recognised the injustice of condemning a woman and letting the man go scot-free.

Still she rejoiced at having punished Giulia. She detested exhibitions of spite, and would have scorned to employ them in her own behalf; but in this instance her conduct was justified by its motive: she had acted in defence of her friend—had triumphed too. Only the day before the duchess's supper, an opportunity offered of proving this.

Lady Harcourt called at the house to leave

some wonderful remedy, for which she had sent to England, and which was to cure Nina's ankle in a magical fashion. Violet and the marchese had been out on horseback, and came in just as her ladyship had risen to take leave.

'I can't even stop to say "How do you do,"' she said, 'for I have to go to a breakfast, a concert, and into the bargain sell a picture for a young painter dear to my soul, who is dying of consumption.'

'Occupation enough for one morning, certainly,' returned Violet.

'I shall see you both to-morrow night,' continued Lady Harcourt. 'Remember, Giulia gives us a supper! Never, not even when presented to his gracious majesty on my seventeenth birthday, was I in such excitement, and I do not expect to be again if I should live a thousand years. Dear, blessed Giulia never gave a supper before and will never give another, so I mean the affair to be memorable.'

'If she dies when the bills come in, her death will rest on your conscience,' said Carlo.

'There will be no bills, *caro mio*,' replied her ladyship. 'Every *restaurateur*, from Doney

down to the lowest tyro, knows your charming enslaver too well to send so much as a *madeleine* to her house, unless paid in advance.'

'Not even a Madeleine *penitente*?' asked Violet.

'She might consider the offering personal,' rejoined Carlo.

'She will be one herself, you wicked American witch—is already; not on account of her sins, but her rashness in proposing the supper,' added Lady Harcourt, laughing.

'She could prove her penitence and avoid the feast by entering a convent,' said Violet.

'Don't condemn her to that,' cried Nina. 'At least, give her the privilege of a monastery.

'She will get out of the dilemma without adopting any such extreme measures,' said Carlo.

'Not this time!' returned Lady Harcourt, triumphantly. 'I have written her three notes and sent several men to ask the hour—she can't escape. I told her I should bring some friends whom I had already invited to my house.'

'That is fiendish cruelty,' said Violet.

'On your part,' retorted my lady. 'You forced her into giving the supper, Violet

Cameron. You put her in a corner, and she had to eat you or be eaten in order to get out. She chose the latter alternative. But wait, my dear. Giulia will pay you before the winter is over, or rather, make you pay, supper and all !'

'Really !' laughed Violet. 'How am I in fault ?'

'Oh, I don't know ; I ask no questions, I await the course of events. I am reasonably fond of you, I adore her—*ça va sans dire !* If she poisons you I'll come to the funeral, I promise that.' And off my lady ran, pausing in the doorway long enough to add, 'I shall stop downstairs to inquire after poor Aylmer, but the professor need not be vexed, for I have no jessamines to leave, and no reputation. I say that to save you the trouble.'

'Supper indeed !' quoth Carlo. 'I know one person who will not be deluded.'

'But you will go—you must,' said Nina ; and you too, Violet.'

'There is no necessity in my case. The duchess made it so evident she was not visiting me the day she gave the invitation, that I am absolved from any part therein. But Carlo is not, and for once in the annals of anybody's history, pleasure will be united with duty.'

'Then have some refreshment ready for me when I get back. I shall be starved if I trust to what I get there,' cried Carlo.

'*Entendu!*' said Violet. 'But be sure you appear in time to partake of it, though Circe and all her nymphs stand in the way.'

'I am sick of Circe, and I hate her nymphs,' rejoined Carlo.

Nina glanced at Violet from the corners of her beautiful almond-shaped eyes. Carlo was looking at his wife, but he lost the glance, though Violet, whose head was half turned away, caught it distinctly. If the married pair lived to the age of the patriarchs, Carlo would never be permitted to dream that Nina had for an instant been jealous of the duchess. Indeed, while this by-play went on, his thoughts ran in this fashion:

'I swear that little wife of mine is the daintiest, sweetest, most charming creature in the world. It is ridiculous that I could have been attracted by that great coarse Rimini—I never was!'

And, though neither of the ladies were observing him, so far as he knew, both were as cognisant of his reflections as if he had put them into spoken language.

Carlo's fancy for the duchess, already on

the wane when her misadventure occurred, had been killed outright as dead as Pharaoh.

He went to the famous supper which would supply Lady Harcourt with gibes and jests during the whole season. There was a mayonnaise and weak punch with the sugar left out, and the duchess informed her guests that one glass of punch would do nobody any harm, and nobody was tempted to try a second.

But beggarly as the feast appeared to the invited, the expense rankled in Giulia's mind. She would without hesitation lavish thousands of francs upon her dress, or lose them at cards—would in both cases, if impossible to avoid the necessity, pay her debts with a reasonable degree of resignation, but in spite of this she was miserly beyond belief. So she had two causes for virulent hatred against Violet, and positively she hated her worse for having unintentionally forced her to give the supper than for deliberately exposing her to Carlo. She did not care about him, but he had lately come into possession of a large sum of ready money. The duchess wanted money, was terribly cramped this season, and she had meant him to pay certain debts, the creditors

for which were importunate creatures who gave her no peace.

A caprice for Laurence Aylmer she had, and a singularly strong one, insensible as he seemed to her fascinations. She had been confident the day she entered his rooms that she could do so with impunity.

When she went to the house she had not dreamed there would be a possibility of seeing him, but as she was descending the stairs, she perceived that the doors of the ground-floor apartment were open—not a soul in sight.

The duchess peeped into the first salon—empty. She passed on. In the second room the sister knelt before the statue of some saint, her head buried in her hands, so deeply absorbed in prayer that she was lost to all sublunary surroundings. Giulia noiselessly crossed the carpeted floor and gained the sick-room.

Aylmer slept, his head supported high upon the pillows ; the open collar of his night-shirt exposing the graceful neck and the outlines of the muscular shoulders.

The woman crept up to the bed, leaned over and pressed her lips upon his throat. The caress roused the wounded man ; he

opened his great eyes, into which a sudden feverish brightness rushed, and half raised himself, uttering some incoherent exclamation. She believed that he recognised her, but she heard a step in the room at the side of the chamber, and fled, afraid of discovery—dropping the bouquet of jessamines on his pillow as she hurried away.

She ran out just in time to escape the professor, ran through the salon where the sister still knelt, and reached the outer door, but before she could cross the threshold, met Antonio.

'I have made a most unfortunate blunder,' she said quickly; 'I thought the Marchesa Magnoletti was established in this apartment! Luckily neither the sick man nor his nurse saw me. Say nothing about my mistake, if you please; it is most annoying to me;' and as she spoke, she actually put ten francs in his hand! She would almost rather have submitted to the loss of one of her perfect teeth, but there was no escape!

During the ensuing fortnight Miss Cameron's visits to the sick-room continued very frequent.

The professor would come for her, and she could not refuse his request; indeed, there

was no reason why she should, save the personal shrinking caused by her belief that the patient mistook her for Giulia Rimini, since he babbled about the jessamines and her sudden disappearance. Why had she gone—why? And did she remember——

What? The often-begun sentence could never get itself finished. His mind was always unable to seize one special incident that he desired to recall, though it haunted his fancy with wearisome persistency.

'I can't tell it—I can't tell it!' he would say, in a despairing tone, then sometimes become vexed that she did not help him, and cry: 'You could give me the word, and you will not; you are cruel—cruel!'

But the instant he said this he regretted it, and would snatch her hands and press his fevered lips on them, exclaiming:

'I did not mean that; you know I did not! Say you are sure I did not mean it!'

Violet could neglect no effort to quiet him. The professor told her frankly that the humouring of his fancies might have a great effect upon his recovery. Indeed, if she hesitated about letting the sick man hold her hand, or kept him waiting for an answer to

his eager questions, she would immediately become aware of the professor's head thrust in at the door, his lynx-eyes glaring at her from under their bushy brows. Nor did he content himself with glaring; he did not scruple even to shake his fist at her, while he stood on one leg and waved the other in the air like an impatient Mercury preparing for flight.

Sometimes in the midst of her pity and annoyance—her inexplicable bitterness towards the patient—her anger at herself for such emotion—a fit of laughter would seize Violet, forcing her to bury her head in the counterpane to smother the ill-timed merriment which hurt her cruelly all the while. To catch the absurd side of the situation, yet comprehend so clearly its grave aspect, seemed like regarding a dismal tragedy and seeing some evil-disposed imp thrust a grotesque caricature thereof close at its side.

On a certain evening the professor's patience, never his strong point—a thing noticeable both in great savants and great saints—had been completely exhausted by his patient's having delirium when he ought to be sane, and behaving in every particular

just the opposite of what was his obvious duty. So when the doctor heard the outer doors open to admit Miss Cameron on her return from the opera, he dashed into the entrance-hall. In his haste he nearly fell over the lady, and was freshly irritated by the burst of laughter wherewith she acknowledged his presence; standing there so beautiful in her white draperies, that the professor could not decide which emotion predominated in his soul—a wicked desire to shake her, or a ridiculous impulse to go on his knees as if one of the angelic beings, concerning whose existence he affected such doubts in his discussions with Eliza Bronson, had suddenly appeared before him.

'What have I done that you should try to bring my ill-spent existence to an abrupt close by running over me?' Miss Cameron asked.

'Done!' thundered the professor. 'Everybody does the very thing that is out of place and absurd!'

'Witness your trying to crush me when I enter my house,' laughed Violet.

'I am not talking about myself,' he grumbled. 'It is no matter about me!'

'And no matter if I am broken in pieces, I suppose!' returned she, still laughing.

'Oh, very well! If you can do nothing better than sneer, and behave like—like—well, like a woman—*ach, mein Gott*, there is no other comparison serves—then I'll leave you!' thundered the professor.

'First you had better tell me what *is* the matter,' said Violet.

'Matter!' he echoed. 'Everything—except, indeed, what ought to happen! I swear by the river Styx and the northern god Thor, that never, never—if I live to be old as Methuselah, and visionary as Eliza Bronson's St. Paul—will I ever again take the charge of an American! No, not if we were the only two people left on this terrestrial globe!'

'I know what ails you,' said Violet. 'You have had no supper.'

'I wonder when I could have found an instant to snatch a morsel!' cried he.

'Go upstairs, and you shall have many morsels—toothsome and indigestible as any that even a German cook could devise. Antonio, take good care of the professor, and see he has some beer,' she added, looking over her shoulder towards that personage, who stood secretly smiling at the irate savant. 'I

will sit with your patient while you are gone, Esculapius. I suppose that is what you want.'

The professor began to laugh.

'I'd like to say no, just from a spirit of contradiction,' he said; 'but I should only punish myself. If you don't go, he will rave all night, like the fool he is, and I shall have to watch him; for I notice that blessed sister always enjoys her soundest sleep when there is the most need of her keeping awake! Per Bacco, if your religious fables had any foundation, what a drowsy set the elect would be up in their pearl-gated paradise!'

'My dear professor, eat your supper, drink your beer, and convince yourself that at least your corporeal part is not a delusion,' counselled Miss Cameron.

'*Tausend teufels*!' exclaimed the savant, glowering at her. 'You really are a beauty! It is a pity you are only so much hydrogen, and oxygen, and——'

'Never mind the rest of the unpleasant compounds, you dreadful old materialistic absurdity,' interrupted Violet, and disappeared within the arched portals which led to the sick man's quarters.

The professor snorted, settled his cravat, frowned at Antonio, and ejaculated:

'She is the most wonderful creature in the world—about the only one worthy the name of woman.'

'She is, sir,' said Antonio, in the meekest underkey of his many-toned voice. He knew that if he spoke the professor would snub him; if he did not speak, the professor would rate him for his impertinence. 'She is indeed, sir.'

'Mind your business!' howled the savant. 'Who permitted you to have opinions? Set you up, indeed! As if you had reached the stage of development when the human animal acquires what they call a soul—the fools!'

Antonio bowed low.

'What are you jerking about for like a monkey?' demanded the professor. 'Do you know we are all a superior sort of apes—not so very superior, either—nothing else, the grandest of us?'

'If you please, sir—whatever you like, sir,' said Antonio.

'I don't like it at all,' shouted the professor; 'but my likings don't change facts. Oh, see here, come upstairs and find me a crust! My stomach is as empty as a balloon—that is what makes me theoretical.'

'It is not exactly the word I should have chosen to express your damnable ill-temper,' muttered the Swiss, but wisely spoke so low that his commentary did not reach the ears of the irascible savant, who, before they gained the top of the stairs, had forgotten hunger and annoyance in the interest with which he questioned Antonio about a sick baby belonging to some one of Miss Cameron's numerous pensioners.

Violet entered the apartment of the *rez-de-chaussée*. In the salon next Aylmer's chamber sat the sister. Her arms rested on a table, her head reposed on her arms, and she was slumbering sweetly; the slow, measured breathings which escaped her lips at regular intervals sounding so like 'Ave —ave—Maria—a—ve,' that it seemed as if she must be continuing her orisons in her sleep.

Miss Cameron reached the bedroom. The instant her foot crossed the threshold, lightly as she trod, carefully as she gathered her silken draperies in her hand, to prevent any rustle disturbing the sick man's ear, the voice which she had heard as she traversed the salons ceased its utterance: the sufferer lay perfectly quiet.

The same effect had so often been produced during the past days and nights that Violet could not call it chance. At first she had endeavoured to do so, had smiled at the professor's talk about magnetic influence, psychological mysteries, and the rest ; but that her presence could always mysteriously soothe the patient was certain. True, there remained the idea that he mistook her for some one else ; and that some one else, of all women, Giulia da Rimini ! This was hard. It rendered her visits always a trial ; mixed something revolting therewith, which would not bear thinking about, and brought back the stern judgment that she had determined to put aside until he should be restored to health.

As she seated herself by the bed, Aylmer looked up, and said eagerly :

' Thanks, thanks ! What a shame for me to trouble you like this !'

He spoke so rationally that, for an instant, she thought he knew what he was saying, then recollected how several times she had allowed herself to be deceived by similar appearances.

He shut his eyes. His fingers, stretched out across the counterpane, moved slowly, restlessly, and would not be still. She knew

what she should have to do—lay her hand in his. This little struggle of wills invariably took place between them—invariably she was obliged to yield.

So now, after waiting so long that her conscience reproached her as cruel, she laid her cool fingers upon his palm. His hand closed quickly over hers, a smile hovered about his lips—lingering there even after he had fallen asleep.

She sat still for perhaps twenty minutes—was beginning to wonder the professor did not return—to think she might rise, trusting to the soundness of the sick man's slumber not to disturb him—when he opened his eyes again, saying softly :

'I did not dream it—you are here !'

'Yes, I am here,' she answered, humouring his mood as the doctor had bidden her always to do.

'It is too bad you should be troubled ! You were here when I fell asleep—I know ! I can tell the moment you reach the threshold.'

How rational his voice sounded ; weaker, slower too than usual. Could he be conscious what he was saying ?

'You did not think I could tell ? I can

always recognise your step, even when I am a little out of my head. It does wander very often, I know; but somehow I can't stop it! Now it feels steady—that is because you are here.'

She could not resist the impulse to discover whether, delirious or not, he recognised her; or whether, entering his dreams and fancies, he mistook her for that evil-eyed Circe, to be mistaken for whom, even by the disordered imagination of a sick man, appeared a degradation.

'Because you are here,' he repeated in a low, contented tone.

'Do you know who I am?' she asked.

'What a question, Miss Cameron!'

She was so astonished that she tried to draw her hand away.

'Don't!' he said piteously; 'don't! My head will go if you do. And I want to tell you something—I have wanted to so long: it is always so hard to remember! I try when you are not here—I think I shall when you come back; then it goes—it goes!'

Partially sane he certainly was; he must be soothed. This was no time for nonsensical scruples or whims on her part. She must quiet him; it was simply a humane necessity,

as much as it would be to give him a drink if he complained of thirst.

'You will recollect presently,' she said. 'See, I am here—I will sit beside you.'

'Not know you? What an odd idea!' he rambled on; 'why, I did from the very first, bad as my head was. Though, somehow, that once it did not seem to be you—but that was my head. You just came softly in and laid the flowers on my pillow. Ha, ha!—the fever, you know—I dreamed you kissed me! Yet it didn't seem you—somebody trying to deceive me! Then the doctor carried off the flowers. I wanted to tell him to let them alone, but I could not make him understand. Not know you? It was only that once I had any doubt—only that once!'

So he babbled on, holding her hand fast, recognising her, but not able to repress the utterance of any fancy which crossed his mind; not sufficiently rational to attempt to do so.

And Violet sat beside him until he again fell asleep.

He had known her from the first: the flowers he had believed her gift! It was not Giulia da Rimini who occupied his thoughts; her censure had been undeserved.

The woman's coming was not his fault. Nina had vowed over and over that he disliked the creature! And—and—he had always known her, Violet, even in the height of his delirium.

Yes, the old professor was right! The human soul—intellect—intelligence—call it by whatever name science pleased—held strange, inexplicable mysteries.

He had known her—Violet! She could sit there in peace! She had been unjust to him, and she was sorry, very sorry.

CHAPTER VIII.

HIS DISCOVERY.

Aylmer's fever yielded, his strength began to return, and the doctor pronounced him convalescent. At first he shrank from any effort at thought ; it caused a confusion in his brain resembling the delirium, which, having as a rule been only partial, left him conscious his wits were astray, making him sometimes feel as if an exterior intelligence had lodged itself in his soul, and was watching his mental aberrations with cynical amusement.

Miss Cameron's visits ceased with the recovery of his reason, and Aylmer did not mention her name, afraid of learning that his impression of her frequent presence was as unreal as his other delusions. Indeed, for awhile, even the accident seemed a part of those feverish visions. Then that settled into reality, as did the fact of her safety.

He liked to lie with closed eyes and recall the noiseless appearance of that beautiful figure when his wanderings became painful—the touch of her cool hand, the sound of her low sweet voice. As he grew able to reflect, he argued that his fancy was not surprising, since no woman had ever impressed him so deeply from the moment of their meeting, and during the entire day and evening which closed so tragically she had been the prominent subject in his mind.

He had stood at a distance and watched her that afternoon in the Cascine, would not even ask a question concerning her, prevented by some impulse as strong as he felt it romantic and boyish. She had started up before him like a revelation of beauty from some higher sphere, such as the old Greeks believed occasionally granted to mortals, and he wanted as long as he could to keep her separate from ordinary humanity. Though he smiled at his own folly he obeyed it, and carefully avoided several acquaintances whom he noticed conversing with her, lest he should be obliged to listen to verbiage which would at once transform his goddess into common clay.

A few hours later she had appeared again

to his sight, more lovely than ever. For a little he had been troubled by something in her manner which seemed to imply a prejudice against him, but that fear vanished under the charm of her conversation. He had driven out to the villa with a friend, but he desired to escape companionship on his return. The night was so perfect that he determined to walk back to Florence. He had seated himself by the roadside, lost in some vague dream, of which she was the object, when roused by the tramp of the frightened horses.

His last thought before he sank down, down into the dark—so the catastrophe presented itself to him—had been of her danger; every faculty of mind and body concentrated in a wild effort to save her. So it was natural enough that her image should have haunted his delirious hours, and her fancied presence have possessed the power to calm him, as he recollected had often been the case.

The professor wished his patient still to remain in ignorance of his whereabouts, and when the marchesa got able to go downstairs, cautioned her to wear a bonnet, so that she might be supposed to have come from her own house. Carlo also had to be vouchsafed admit-

tance to the sick-chamber, but the savant, fearful of some indiscretion, glared and frowned till the poor man could not talk at all, and behaved so stupidly that ungrateful Aylmer rejoiced over his departure, whereupon the old tyrant chuckled hugely.

More days passed. Nina had paid another visit; Carlo had been sat upon anew, and at last, though the sweetest-tempered of mortals, he could not refrain from asserting himself a little when he and the doctor went upstairs.

'The poor fellow can be removed now,' he said; 'so he might as well hear the truth. It is quite dreadful for us to make Miss Cameron's house an hotel any longer.'

'I don't care!' retorted the savant. 'Why did she smash him under her horses' hoofs? I'll tell him when I'm ready, not before. *Ach, mein Gott!* you boy—you *marchesino*—are you to teach the old German?'

Though Violet joined in the laughter with which Nina and Carlo received the professor's testiness, she was not pleased at his refusal to let her offer any sign of gratitude or sympathy to the patient.

'He must think me an absolute monster,' she said.

'Hasn't spoken of you,' returned the German, in a satisfied tone.

'No wonder! Probably he does not consider me worth mentioning—a woman who does not even take the trouble to inquire after him when he received his injury in saving her! Come, professor, I will not endure such tyranny any longer.'

'Won't you, indeed!' growled the professor.

'At least take him a message from her,' urged Nina.

'Message!' echoed the professor, in high contempt.

'Or a bunch of jessamines,' laughed Carlo, and Nina laughed too with all her heart.

Violet turned and pulled down a blind which let too much light in upon a stand of flowers. A wave of colour like a reflection of the sunbeams crossed her cheeks, but luckily nobody noticed it.

'I'll have no risks run,' pursued the savant. 'I have studied the fellow as carefully as if he were a bit of fossil from which I could make out a new animal that would prove a link between man and his monkey ancestor, instead of that useless phase of development, a modern young dandy.'

'Take that, Carlino mio,' parenthesised Nina.

'Just so,' said the professor. 'No, no; leave me to manage matters. I don't suppose the Fräulein really wants to turn us out.'

'Now, professor!'

'It was the marchese's insinuation.'

'Aren't you ashamed, Carlo?' said Violet.

'I am ashamed of him,' added Nina.

'You dreadful old scarabeus of a professor!' cried Carlo. 'You bring them down on me in order that you may escape.' At this juncture Eliza Bronson, seated in a corner to which she had retired on Schmidt's entrance, heaved an ostentatious sigh. 'Pray come to my rescue, Miss Bronson,' continued Carlo.

'Oh, marchese,' returned she, with a shiver, 'please do not ask me. Everybody here knows my sentiments!'

'If you come to anything so tender, I, as that wretch's injured wife, had better leave the room,' cried the incorrigible Nina.

'Eliza, I shall be obliged to engage you a mentor,' said Violet.

'As soon as my patient is better, I shall feel highly honoured if I can be entrusted with that pleasurable duty,' observed the professor, in an insinuating voice.

'Now, Miss Bronson, do not be silenced by

their folly,' pleaded Carlo. 'Speak out; give me your moral support.'

Eliza assumed her governess manner, sitting as erect in her chair as if it had been a schoolroom official bench.

'I cannot jest upon a subject which appears to my mind—I do not judge for others—' she cast a glance of condemnation at Nina and Violet, which grew positively withering as it fell upon the professor, who acknowledged it by a second bow, very grave and serious. 'If I speak at all—I can be silent if desired——'

'By no means!' cooed the professor, with the amiability of a very hoarse dove.

'Then I must speak sincerely,' pursued Eliza.

'Sincerity is what I want,' said Carlo: 'sincerity and justice.'

'I honour your sentiments, marchese,' replied Eliza, as incapable of comprehending a jest as a statue of Minerva would be. 'I have told Miss Cameron—I said it at first—I have warned her again and again what would be the result of that ill-advised step—ill-advised at least in my opinion—remember I only speak as a unit—of introducing that stranger gentleman under the roof of two lone ladies——'

'*Ach Gott!*' snorted the professor, unable to control his delight.

'Yes, and I repeat it now, repeat it with energy!' cried Eliza, glaring at the disrespectful savant. 'Neither gibes nor sneers shall prevent me, when called upon to testify, from speaking the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!'

'Sir Samuel Johnson!' the professor remarked to Nina, in an audible whisper.

Eliza paused to overwhelm this troubler of her eloquence with the proofs of his own ignorance.

'The great man whom you mention only bore the title of Doctor of Arts, nor was he the author of the sentiment I quoted,' said she, with lofty condescension. 'But in your character of German professor both errors are perhaps excusable, Mr. Schmidt.'

'Miss Bronson, I thank you for setting me right, and promise never to interrupt you again,' replied he, suavely.

'I have been silent,' continued Eliza, 'because I perceived that my opinion was not desired, but now I am called on, and must declare that my worst fears have been more than fulfilled. Yes, Violet, you may smile—you, marchesa, may encourage her thoughtless

levity—but I, her real friend, the guide of her youth, I shudder at the reports which are current.'

'Miss Bronson, your verdict overwhelms me!' cried the professor.

'Sir,' said she, 'I should be glad if I could think you spoke seriously, with the gravity becoming so renowned a man.'

'How neatly she mingles condemnation and compliment!' cried the unabashed professor, lifting both hands in sign of admiration.

'Wherever approval is possible, be it much or little, I hope I always accord it,' said Eliza. 'I trust that at least I am a just woman——'

'Then you are a phenomenon indeed!' cut in he. 'Why, even your pet St. Paul——'

Eliza interrupted him by rising. She swept to the door, paused, and addressed the company generally, rolling up her eyes as if to include the cherubs on the ceiling in her explanation.

'I must excuse myself,' she said, in a voice at once tremulous and dignified. 'I have learned to endure a great deal, but not sneers upon sacred subjects and characters—not that!—no, no!'

'St. Paul declared that women——'

But Eliza was gone. The professor laughed

till his eyes were full of tears, and the others laughed too, even while reproaching him for his unmerciful teasing of the poor spinster.

'It does her good,' he declared, 'puts new life in her, and she enjoys it. The worthy Miss Bronson belongs to the type of women who is happiest when most miserable.'

The truth was that, independent of his professional solicitude, the doctor had motives for wanting to defer explanations as long as possible. He disliked the idea of the separation which must ensue, the going back to his bachelor abode and the isolation he had always declared necessary to a student.

The society of those gay young people had come to the professor like a breath of fresh air, a season of repose in some summer garden among sunshine and flowers, and he hated to relinquish it, though he spluttered dreadful sounding German imprecations over his own folly, and added many opprobrious epithets not in keeping with the learned titles he had a right to claim.

Occasionally he caught himself wondering whether there might not be a strange happiness for a man who, instead of consecrating his life to science, lived the existence of common mortals, loved, married, and possessed

children to brighten his age—beautiful, clever, appreciative daughters like the marchesa and Fräulein Violet—a son gifted and full of glorious promise as this Laurence.

But, in spite of the professor's care, the disclosure which he desired still further to avert, came the very day after Eliza Bronson had gratified the party by an exposition of her views as to the present state of affairs in Miss Cameron's household.

The savant had left Antonio to assist the patient to bathe and dress; that operation concluded, the invalid must rest for half an hour—sleep if he could—then take some soup, and later, be allowed to sit up awhile. Each detail in the day's programme had been carefully expounded, and both Aylmer and Antonio knew that no shadow of infringement upon his commands would be permitted by the professor, any more than if he were an Eastern satrap.

His toilet completed, Aylmer lay down again; Antonio seated himself near the bed, and before very long his charge appeared to have sunk into slumber. As Antonio was congratulating himself on the fact, he suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to give the porter a message, and as any forgetfulness

of duty constituted a crime in the faithful creature's code, he felt suitably guilty.

The nurse was in the adjoining salon—he would beg her to repair his error. So he stole to the door with elaborate caution, and succeeded in attracting the sister's attention from her book of 'Hours.'

'I must not go out,' he whispered, as she approached; 'the professor bade me not. Would you be so good, *ma sœur*, as to tell Giovanni that Miss Cameron——'

'I can't hear,' interrupted the sister, in a mournful voice, like a wind across a burial-ground.

'Tell the porter that my mistress—that Miss Cameron says——'

These words reached Aylmer's ear. He was not asleep, only lying quiet, recalling those hours of delirium brightened by the fancied companionship of that beautiful woman; just tired enough after his recent exertions to enjoy the sort of waking dream wherein her image floated up from the misty depths of the past days' mental wanderings, only all the while conscious of a vague regret that there had been no reality in them.

And straight across his reverie Antonio

flung her name; he heard it distinctly, cautiously as the man spoke.

'My mistress—Miss Cameron!'

Aylmer half-raised himself on his pillow, listened eagerly, but not another syllable could he catch. He sank back again, and when Antonio reached the bed, his face was turned towards the wall: apparently he still slept.

There he lay thinking—thinking. He did not wish to ask a question yet; only to lie in luxurious invalid ease, and dwell upon the new reflection which warmed his very soul.

That recollection so strongly impressed upon his mind was no part of his delusions! She had been there—again and again—appearing in her loveliness to quiet him when that fear of some inexplicable danger which she ran, rendered his fancies insupportable pain. She had sat by his bed; it was no trick of imagination that he could still feel the touch of her hand on his—hear the sound of her voice which, even while he thought his conviction of having heard it a cheat, thrilled his heart like a strain of music.

It was all real! She had cared—she had come to him! They had, as he remembered telling her over and over, grown friends.

He could recall other avowals he had made—of having known and loved her in some existence anterior to this; where, where? No matter! He had found her again, and they should never part any more—never! She had promised!

And he had actually uttered these declarations to her—not to a creature of his imagination assuming her likeness, but to her! He exulted to think those interviews had been no fantasy! Then he recalled the visit when he had spoken to her about the flowers, and they really had lain upon his pillow, and her hand had placed them there! And thinking these things, at length he fell asleep. When he woke, Antonio had disappeared, and the professor stood at the foot of the bed regarding him with an affectionately ferocious glance.

'Upon my word, young man, you will soon equal the exploits of the Seven Sleepers,' said he. 'I told you to rest twenty minutes or so, and you have slept like a rock for more than an hour, and your soup has twice been sent back to keep hot.'

Aylmer laughed in a joyous fashion. The thought which had gone with him into slumber was uppermost in his mind when he woke.

'Odd,' quoth the professor, 'that only men and hyenas share the capacity for laughter. Ah, I forgot, the animal called the Australian jackass. But the folly is perhaps excusable in a fellow so weak bodily and mentally as you.'

'I feel strong as a second Hercules! I am well—you have cured me, old Esculapius—do you hear? And I want my soup; if it doesn't come instantly, I'll eat the sister!'

'What an overdose of religion you would get,' said the professor, eyeing him narrowly. 'Yes, you are quite yourself again! I forgive your sleeping longer than I ordered, since it has done you so much good. And here comes the soup, and—— By the hammer of Thor, did I bid you bring chicken, too, you silly she prayer-monger?' cried the professor, scowling at the sister, but, luckily for her peace of mind, uttering the epithets which closed his sentence in German. She had grown accustomed to his ferocity, and enjoyed his grim humour in her demure fashion, though his jokes often caused her to say many extra avès (and she said enough at any time), because afraid such hearty laughter might be a sin.

'Yes, you did, and I mean to eat it to the last scrap,' said Aylmer.

He fortified himself with his repast before he took any further notice of the professor, who studied him attentively while pretending to read a newspaper.

'That hour's sleep would not account for the change,' thought the savant. 'Some mental shock—a pleasant one—has happened to him. A shock! How?—who would dare give my patient a shock without permission, I should like to know!'

He scowled towards each corner of the room in turn at an imaginary offender, finally concentrating his gaze on the marble nymph, and so formidable was he of aspect, that had the figure been Galatea newly awakened to life, she certainly would have speedily petrified under his awful stare.

'Professor!' said Aylmer, abruptly.

'It is coming!' meditated the savant. 'Whatever it may be, it is coming! After all, better than for him to be brooding over fancies.'

Though the learned man did not know it, this reflection was an excuse he offered his conscience for the curiosity he felt to learn the cause of the convalescent's high spirits,

and as curiosity is a weakness unworthy a philosopher, he gave it another name in order to avoid self-contempt.

'Professor!' repeated Aylmer, with the impatience always considered allowable in a person just turning into the highroad of recovery after a dangerous illness.

'Eh? did you speak?' asked the wise man, deceitfully pretending to rouse himself with difficulty from some interesting paragraph, and holding the journal partially before his face.

'Please to lay down that newspaper for a moment,' said Aylmer.

'What, what!' growled the professor. 'He begins to order his doctor about. The schoolboy rises against his master, the pot questions the potter! Come, come, none of that, you rebel, else I'll find a dose that will make you as obedient as you were two days since.'

Aylmer laughed again. There was such a ring of returning health and strength in the merriment that it sounded like music to the professor's ears.

'Whose house did you tell me this was?' demanded Aylmer.

'So!' said the savant, mentally. 'I thought that was it!'

'Can't you answer? whose house?' persisted the patient.

'Did I say?' returned the professor, in a questioning tone, as if trying to call to mind any such information on his part.

'Yes, you did,' retorted Aylmer; 'you know you did. You said it was yours.'

'Oh, very well; if I told you, there is no necessity of interrupting my reading in order to ask again,' said the professor, coolly. 'Here is a very interesting *résumé* of a speech by Gladstone; if you like I'll read it to you, as a reward for being so well to-day.'

'I don't care a fig about Gladstone's speech —it is yours I am thinking of,' answered Aylmer, gaily. 'You did say this house was yours!'

'You have already made that assertion: you have made a great many other foolish ones during the last weeks. I hope you are not losing your head again—not much of a head, to be sure, but, as it is the best you've got, it would be wiser to stick to it,' said the professor.

'Come now, leave prevarication to your pet Bismarck and his fellow-diplomatists. You said this was your house.'

'What a persistent devil! Very well, for

the sake of peace, admit that I did—what then ?'

'Why, it is not.'

'Then we have come to the end of the matter, and I can read my newspaper,' replied the professor.

Aylmer snatched the journal with boyish playfulness.

'You can't escape that way,' said he. 'You said it was your house, and it isn't, and so——'

'I told a lie, that's all,' interrupted the professor, complacently.

'Of course you did : what for ?' questioned Aylmer.

'To keep you from fretting and worrying and making an idiot of yourself, you ungrateful development of a protoplasm,' cried the professor, laughing too.

'Then it *is* Miss Cameron's house ! She did come to see me—I did not dream it !' exclaimed Aylmer, excitedly.

'And if you are going to lash yourself into fresh fever I'll go away,' thundered the professor.

'No, no—don't, don't ! Tell me all about it, like a good-natured old fellow as you are.'

'I'll not be called good-natured ; that is one insult too many,' cried the professor.

'What a dolt I was to let myself be convinced that her coming was a dream,' Aylmer continued half aloud, with a sudden colour in his face, a sudden brightness in his eyes, which caused the doctor to make a hasty clutch at his wrist to ascertain what story the pulse was telling.

'If you excite yourself I'll shave your head at once! I've had worry enough over you,' said he.

'I've no more fever than you,' retorted Aylmer. Then he laid his hand on the professor's and added coaxingly: 'Ah, now tell me all about it. See, I am perfectly quiet, and I want to hear.'

'Well, well,' grumbled the professor, charmed with the spirit in which his patient received this discovery. 'The *all* is easily told. After the horses tumbled you over you were put into the carriage, and she--Miss Cameron—brought you into Florence and drove to my house. We didn't know where you lived; my place was upset. We couldn't exactly consign you to a hospital, so she brought you here--that's the whole.'

'I did not dream it,' Aylmer was thinking. 'She has been here often, talked to me, held my hand, sat in that very chair.' He glanced

towards the fauteuil in which the professor was established, and exclaimed imperiously: 'Get up out of that chair—take another!'

'There, he is mad again; I was sure of it,' snarled the professor.

'I will be, unless you do exactly as I say. It's my turn to give orders now,' said Aylmer, laughing, but tugging at the savant's hand with such force as he could muster.

'Come, I'll take this one,' said the professor, rising. 'Now tell me why, you rebel.'

'Oh, I couldn't see you so well——'

'That's not a prevarication—that's a falsehood!' broke in the savant.

'You perceive what your example has done,' said Aylmer. 'It was just a sudden whim that made me wish you to get up. I may have whims—a sick man's privilege.'

'Well, well,' returned the professor, 'you may do pretty much what you like. I am content with you for taking the news as you do. You can understand why I let you think yourself in my house. You would have worried over being a trouble, perhaps have insisted on being removed, and that—well, that would have made a pretty kettle of fish,' concluded the professor, inelegantly but forcibly.

Aylmer was dreaming again. That voice

rang in his ear—the touch of those slender fingers thrilled his pulses anew. He roused himself, becoming suddenly aware of the professor's last speech in the odd way in which, when occupied with some engrossing thought, one does recall words that one was not aware of hearing when they were uttered.

'All the same, it is shocking to think what a bore I have been,' he said, but there was slight compunction in his tone. 'I can be removed, and I must be;' and now his accent sounded regretful enough.

'Nothing can be arranged to-day. You have done enough, and too much,' replied the professor. 'Lie down like a sensible fellow, else you will not be fit to stir for another week. So, so! be a good boy, and listen to Gladstone's eloquence.'

Aylmer consented with praiseworthy obedience, glad to have another half hour with his pleasant fancies. The reading would not disturb their course, and the professor was as well aware of this fact as the patient.

'Yes, read to me,' Aylmer added absently, as he lay back among his pillows.

The doctor took up the newspaper again, and readjusted his glasses, then dropped both, struck by a new thought.

'Sapperment!' he exclaimed; 'how did you find out? Who told you—who dared, after my express orders?'

'Never mind how—I know it. Nobody told me. I evolved it out of my inner consciousness, as if I had been a German professor,' said Aylmer.

They both laughed; then the savant began the speech, and Aylmer lay quiet, and for a whole hour there was no sound in the room save the reader's slow, deep tones.

'But he has not heard a syllable,' thought that gentleman, glancing up as he turned a page. 'No matter, it keeps him quiet; that is the important thing just now.'

CHAPTER IX.

HER COMING.

The afternoon passed—evening was drawing on.

Before the professor set out for a walk he looked into Aylmer's room. He found his patient sitting up, but not in the easy-chair from which he had obliged the doctor to rise—he had refused that—bidding the sister place it opposite him. She obeyed his direction, too much accustomed to sick people's vagaries to give his whim a thought, any more than she had done his sudden fussiness over the arrangement of his hair and the difficulty he made about his attire, insisting that he would not wear a dressing-gown, and giving her no peace until she found among his wardrobe a certain loose breakfast-coat, which proved a very picturesque and becoming

garment, with its wide sleeves and the tracery of dark blue that relieved its grey tint.

'I'm all right,' Aylmer replied to the professor's questions. 'But it begins to be confoundedly lonesome staying cooped up here by myself.'

'So!' thought the savant; then added aloud: 'I mean to bring you a visitor—but mind, if I find you excited and feverish when I get back, you'll not see a human face again, except that salad-in-a-cellar looking sister, for another week.'

'I'll be as good as gold if only I'm not left alone,' returned Aylmer; 'but let me go into the salon. I want a change.'

The professor assisted him into the next room, coaxed him to half lie down on a sofa and promise not to stir; then he went away without having vouchsafed any information in regard to the visitor, nor had Aylmer so much as asked.

It was sunset; through a great arched window swept a soft glow from the western sky. He could look over a stretch of green lawn, across a group of oleanders, down a broad alley, which led away into the recesses of the garden—one of the largest and finest in Florence.

In the distance, walking slowly up the path, he saw a woman's figure—a figure which he recognised. (Remember, he was just escaping from the dominion of that giant Despair called illness, so wild thoughts and irrational fancies were excusable!) It was not the Miss Cameron whom the world knew —the lady he had only seen on four occasions while able to recognise her as a real presence. It was the beautiful vision that had so many times appeared at his eager summons when in his hours of delirium she alone could keep his soul from drifting down the blacker gulf which loomed beyond. The vision he had addressed so freely—the incarnation of the spirit he had known in some lost world where their union possessed such completeness that their two lives formed a perfect whole—one, yet dual, and this duality had made the bliss of living, and——

But he recognised the absurdity of his reflections, and almost thought himself insane again. He sat upright and looked eagerly out at the approaching form, trying to subdue those vagaries of imagination by the force of his will.

Involuntarily he uttered her name, then began to wonder how he knew she was called

Violet; but he had no leisure to recollect, for unawares he spoke aloud and roused the sister seated in the adjoining salon. She supposed he had summoned her, and, dropping her half-counted rosary, appeared in the doorway.

'Does the signore want something?' she said.

And he, impatient, afraid to turn his eyes from the casement lest the figure beneath the oleanders should fade, and so prove to him that he was the victim of fresh delusions, only waved her back with a gesture at once imperious and supplicating. The good sister, trained by long experience in sick-rooms till her commonplace mind had reached a knowledge of what it was best to do under any and every circumstance, quietly returned to her chair, and fell to counting her beads again.

And still, through the window-pane and the oleander boughs, Aylmer watched with his soul in his eyes, and to convince himself of his own sanity, tried to separate Miss Cameron the actual from the visionary creature of his feverish dreams—tried, but could not.

He positively studied each detail of her

dress in his effort to be rational. She must have just come in from a drive; her long green silken petticoat swept over the ground in heavy folds; above it was looped a tunic of some thick dead white material, bordered by the brilliant plumage of tropical birds; beneath her cavalier's hat with its drooping feather, he could see the bands and falling masses of her auburn hair which the sunlight turned to gold.

She stopped to examine a flowering shrub—lifted her arm to pull a branch within reach. The rays fell full upon her face—sent a wave of light into the great eyes—flitted over the melancholy mouth as if seeking to win a smile.

It was she—the woman the world knew—Violet Cameron; all the same, it was the vision of the past days—his friend—his queen—his soul of soul!

Then he heard a voice call abruptly, and came back to reality with a shock. A pane of the window stood open; he could not see the sage, but there was no mistaking those tones.

'Fräulein,' they said, 'I have been hunting for you! My adored Miss Bronson told me that you had come in from your drive. Why

do you hide in the garden like a Dryad when I want you ?'

She did not answer ; waved her hand to the unseen speaker and disappeared.

With a sigh and a sensation of terrible impatience which rendered each second interminable, Aylmer leaned his head back against the sofa cushions and waited.

He would not look out—the garden appeared suddenly to have grown dark ; its depths, thick with shadows, reminded him of the blackness into which sometimes in his fever he had been forced to gaze. He waited, that burning impatience growing stronger. During his illness the vision had always appeared at such moments : would Miss Cameron come now and thereby prove her identity with it ? Or was this present instant only part and parcel of the former fancies—nothing real—even the discovery of the morning delusion also ?

So far he reached in his questionings, then his strained senses caught the opening and closing of a door ; caught the rustle of female garments nearer—coming nearer.

Where he sat he could not see into the rooms beyond, but the sweep of those silken robes, soft as the plash of water in a crystal

basin, thrilled him till the ecstasy became pain, because it roused anew the fear that everything—face—glorious eyes—slow gliding step—musical rustle—was a fantasy. Then he heard her voice—ah, it was all real—her voice!

She was speaking to the sister, making some kind inquiry, then he heard nothing more. His pulses surged up in such united, tumultuous beat that he grew deaf and blind.

After this dizzy pause came her tones again, close at hand, addressing him, bringing him back to reality, but a reality which was a higher heaven even than his dreams.

'The professor bade me come and sit with you. Nobody ever ventures to disobey the professor, so you cannot send me away.'

The whirling mists cleared from before his eyes, and he saw her standing on the threshold. Through the arched window floated a broad ray of red-golden light, and illuminated face and figure as she stood. In his excitement he forgot the courteous phrases he was trying to frame—could only stretch out his hands in eager welcome, crying, uncertain whether he addressed the creation of his fancies or the living woman:

'I thought you would never come again! I thought you would never come!'

And Violet, mistress of herself as she supposed, was forced, in order to convince something in her soul of this supremacy, to inform reason that the strange thrill which shook her rose out of a fear that the professor had erred in thinking his patient wholly recovered from fever.

'So I must humour him,' she thought, moved towards the sofa, let him take her hand, and said aloud:

'I am glad to see you so well. But you are not to tire yourself. The professor will never forgive me if he finds that a visitor has excited you.'

'It is such a rest—such a rest!' Aylmer murmured, for a few instants unable to lift his dizzy head from the cushions, unable to check or regulate his utterance; holding her hand fast; his eyes, unnaturally large from illness, fixed yearningly upon her face. 'It is not a dream—say that it is not a dream!'

With an effort Violet roused herself to the requirements of her *rôle* as visitor to an invalid, accredited by the physician with sufficient sense to render her coming a benefit, not a harm.

She drew her hands away gently, though obliged to employ a certain force to release them, and sat down in an arm-chair by his sofa, saying with a playfulness which was a greater effort still :

'The professor does not permit his patients to have fancies when they are able to sit up and receive guests. So take care, for one never knows when he may be hovering about. Anyway, I see his great meerschaum pipe with the ogre's head lying on the table ; I am certain it is listening, and will repeat every word. How wicked it looks, to be sure ! I always tell him it is his familiar.'

Aylmer recovered self-control to recollect that he risked making this interview the last if he did not manage to get back reason enough to separate dreams and reality, and behave like an ordinary convalescent receiving an ordinary visit.

'I am afraid he has smoked the rooms out of all possibility of ever being habitable—Miss Cameron.'

The little pause before pronouncing her name was caused by the effort required to repress a word which would have utterly ruined the success of his speech in proving his sanity—he had come so near saying Violet.

'Oh no,' she replied; 'I shall like the trace of his presence. I have a great weakness for the good, gruff old doctor.'

The fright which his hardly repressed blunder occasioned Aylmer helped him on to a tolerable pretence of composure.

'Good to me indeed!' he said. 'How am I ever to thank him or you, Miss Cameron?'

'I should think, where I am concerned, forgiveness would be the difficulty, since but for me you would not have met with your accident, would not——'

She left her sentence unfinished.

'I am so thankful I was there,' he half whispered.

Again his hand stretched out to take hers; then he remembered that such privilege was at an end: and she, noting his gesture, had to recollect that obedience to his caprices was no longer a necessity, so natural would it have seemed to let her fingers drop into his.

'We must not talk of all that yet,' she said, as he hurriedly drew back his arm. 'Some time thanks will be mine to offer, if I can find words.'

'No, no——'

'The ogre is listening; his grim eyes plainly say, "No exciting subjects,"' she in-

terrupted laughingly. 'I am very, very glad to find you doing so well, Mr. Aylmer. You have had a weary bout, but thank heaven it is over.'

'Yes, I am quite sound again. I shall be able to remove and let your house end its term of serving as hospital,' he answered, conscious that his words were fairly ungracious, yet unable to check them. He felt hurt by her determination to keep the conversation on an ordinary footing, even though he had just been mentally admitting the necessity.

'The professor will settle all that,' she answered. 'He will permit no interference, especially from his patient. As for me, I am sure I do not need to tell you how glad I have been that I could be of the slightest use in any fashion.'

'In more ways than one you have shown that kindness,' he said, a fresh eagerness quickening his voice. 'I can remember—everything begins to come back quite clearly—how good you were to sit with me when I had driven the professor to the end of his resources and his patience.'

He remembered? Surely only the fact which he had just stated—nothing beyond the

certainty that she used to sit with him and possessed an ability to soothe his pain. He did not recollect his delirious utterances, when to quiet him she talked as great nonsense as he—humoured his fancy about the lost world where they had known each other—allowed him to kiss her hands! Oh, assuredly he did not remember those things. To think he did would render their future intercourse difficult, for they had yet to become acquainted. This was the strangest part of the matter, as strange to Violet as to him.

'You had a visit from the marchese this morning,' she said abruptly, just for the sake of breaking the silence.

'Oh yes, he is very good-natured,' Aylmer answered wearily. 'But men, though they are well enough when one is strong, are so out of place in a sick-room. Carlo fell over a footstool and upset a glass of water on the bed. He meant it all for the best; but it is trying, you know.'

'Very, no doubt,' Violet said, laughing. 'However, those trifles will soon cease to annoy you; you are recovering so fast that before long it will be your turn to upset furniture and spill goblets of water over sick people.'

'Oh, no doubt, though the professor says I must take great care,' said Aylmer, with a sudden wicked repulsion against this rapid recovery, which would involve being cast out of Paradise.

No doubt it was delightful to have health, but really illness had its compensations. So great did they appear at this instant that Aylmer would have resigned himself if the professor had entered and pronounced that his patient must not stir from his sofa or change his companion for at least a month.

Somehow Violet perfectly comprehended what gave rise to the petulant, even undignified answer, since one is always ready to smile at a man's willingness to be careful of his health. She was gratified by his dislike to go away, though she hastened to tell herself that this was natural and right on her part. He had saved her life; she ought to feel an interest in him, to like him, to wish to be pleasant in his eyes.

Then, after a pause, so filled with thought to both that neither knew how long it lasted, Aylmer added:

'But all the same, Miss Cameron, I don't propose to keep indefinite possession of a whole floor of your house. It is quite shock-

ing, and I ought—well, I ought to be much more ashamed than I am.'

'Ah, I forgive you the rest, for the sake of the end of your sentence,' returned Violet. 'Nothing—considering the manner in which you received your injury—could pain me more than for you to suppose that your presence under my roof was any *gêne*.'

'Thanks. Yes, somehow I do know,' cried he. 'You see—please don't be vexed—I forget that you can't feel as if you were acquainted with me. I seem to know you so well! I mean, I got so used to seeing—to expecting you when I was ill.'

Here he broke down; Violet sat with bowed head, and did not offer to help him.

'I say it all very badly. I am afraid it sounds dreadfully impertinent,' he continued, despairingly trying to make amends if he had said anything wrong, yet conscious that if she chose to be offended, each word led him deeper into the slough; 'but I have to try and say it the best I can in my clumsy way! You don't mind, do you? And you have been so good to me that I can't seem just like a stranger—they say people never do to whom one has been kind! I am sure

I only confuse things worse each word I speak; but you do understand?'

And Violet, ashamed of the sudden fit of shyness which had kept her silent under the eager glances that pointed his speech, looked up and smiled, holding out her hand as she did so.

'I understand that we are very good friends and mean to remain so,' she answered.

'Ah!' was his only response, but the tone held such a ring of contentment that it spoke volumes.

He did not seem inclined to let her hand go now he had possession of it, but she drew it away presently, and began to talk of other things than those which had immediate connection with themselves.

The room had filled with the shadows of twilight—neither knew. Violet was brought back to a sense of the length of her visit by noticing that the sister had lighted a lamp.

'I shall be late for dinner,' she said, rising; 'as I have guests, it will not do to keep them waiting. I hope before long you will be able to join us, Mr. Aylmer.'

'Yes, I hope so!' Then, very dolefully,

'Must you go? Oh, I beg your pardon! It was so kind of you to come.'

'How is he, that newly-come-back-to-life atom?' called a voice from the door, and the professor entered.

'Much better, I am sure,' Violet said.

'Yes; Miss Cameron's visit has done me more good than all your drugs,' said Aylmer.

'As if I gave drugs! Well, never mind. Yes—better: pulse good. Come, come, it is all right! Miss Cameron must promise to visit you to-morrow.'

'Mr. Aylmer wishes to run away at once,' she said.

'I forbid it!' cried the doctor. 'He must not make any change for some days yet. I'll not have him upset the good effects of my care by any nonsensical scruples.'

Aylmer would have liked to hug the old man.

'You are quite right,' said Violet; 'it would be very ungrateful.'

'I really am in earnest,' the professor continued; 'a change from one house to another is a serious matter. Do what we might, it would be like a new climate.'

'You hear?' said Violet, once more offering

her hand to the invalid. 'Try not to regret your imprisonment too much; we will lighten it all we can.'

She went out of the room, leaving the faint perfume which hung about her dress to soothe him by its fragrance, and he, without remonstrance, yielded to the professor's order that he was to go to bed; and, once there, slept soundly and well.

CHAPTER X.

MI-CARÊME.

Towards the close of Aylmer's imprisonment he was able, with the help of Antonio's arm, to get upstairs several times.

On his first visit, to the intense amusement of the observers, he achieved a wonderful exploit—thoroughly charmed Miss Bronson. From that hour she forgot all fear for her own and Violet's reputation. Whenever Aylmer remembered to enter some feeble protest against remaining any longer a nuisance, Eliza proved the most urgent in her warnings that he must have patience and commit no imprudence, and waxed pathetic over his using a word which might imply that he thought his friends capable of wearying in the pursuance of what was at once a duty and pleasure—the careful guarding of his convalescence.

She fretted him a good deal by rushing about in his wake with footstools, unexpectedly burying him under rugs or shawls to avert insidious draughts, uttering doleful little squeaks when he rose suddenly, convinced that he was about to fall, and selecting her stateliest phrases to reprove the others for their lack of attention. Once the professor declared that in his opinion his late patient was a lazy young dog who pretended weakness in order to excite sympathy. Eliza, as usual, accepted the jest as a serious accusation, turned sharply on the old German and informed him that it was sufficient for a man to be an atheist—to add hard-heartedness to this sin rendered him a monster.

But Aylmer bore her well-intended persecutions with outward patience, and would not allow Nina and the savant to tease her nearly so much as they wished—her very peculiarities had a sacredness in his eyes, because she was intimately connected with Miss Cameron.

So the little party, containing such apparently incongruous elements, passed many pleasant hours. It grew the habit for them all to spend a great deal of time in Aylmer's salon. Carlo sacrificed the attractions of *cercle* and cards in an astounding fashion, and Eliza

accused the marchesa and Violet of downright cruelty if they ventured to interfere with the convalescent's claims by going out to drive or accepting any invitation for the evening.

But these enjoyable days came to an end. Aylmer grew so well that he needed more exercise than occasional walks in the garden afforded, and of course when he could leave the palace enclosures, there was no excuse for his returning in the character of resident.

The professor decided that a breath of sea-air would prove beneficial, so one morning he carried Laurence off to Spezia. Carlo and Nina went back to the villa, and the two 'lone ladies' were free to resume the propriety so precious to Eliza. To Violet's great diversion, before the day was over that return caused the spinster a slight sensation of boredom, and she positively snubbed the most potent of all the American colonists who chanced to pay her a visit, and, learning that Mr. Aylmer had been able to quit the house, ventured upon some congratulatory remark.

'You were quite savage with that stately dame,' Violet said, when the guest had departed.

'My dear,' replied Eliza, 'I trust I shall never fail in my duty towards you, nor can I

submit personally to glaringly gross injustice. To hint that it must be a relief to have Mr. Aylmer gone was to imply that we were too selfish to entertain sympathy for illness and suffering.'

Violet good-naturedly refrained from reminding her what her own opinions had been until recently, as the accusation of inconsistency would have cruelly hurt the over-sensitive Eliza, who believed herself entirely free from that weakness so common to humanity.

The next morning letters came from Mrs. Danvers and her step-daughter.

'The poor lady has been ill,' Violet explained. 'Mary has nursed her. Mr. Danvers's death seems to have brought them closer together—that is a comfort.'

'And when does the daughter sail?'

'There is no time set; she cannot leave her step-mother yet. Who knows? perhaps they would rather keep together. I shall write to-day and make that possible, if they prefer it.'

Violet was conscious of wishing that they might: she had an odd shrinking from George Danvers's daughter. Then she reproached herself therefor, and wrote kindly and heartily.

Ten days went by—days during which a strange restlessness asserted its supremacy over Violet's will, changing its form at pleasure with Protean facility; now assuming the guise of despondency, anon of elation, and vexing her always by its lack of foundation in reason or common-sense.

At length she received a note from Nina, begging her to spend a few days at the villa.

'I have taken cold, and am feverish and miserable,' the little lady wrote. 'Those dreadful workmen have not yet left the house in town, so I am forced to remain here. Carlo is good as gold—though I do not care to put him forth as transferable currency—but I am sure he is terribly bored. So do come, like an angel—or like yourself, which will be better.

'I am afraid to ask dear Miss Bronson to accompany you, because, in order to keep Carlo at home, I encourage waifs from the gaming set every evening, and the house resembles a small Monaco; but if she can support the wickedness, I shall be charmed to see her.'

Of course Violet would go. Nina's society was always a pleasure, and a change of any sort acceptable just now. She gave Miss

Bronson the invitation, but that wise virgin shook her head in disapproval.

'I have my soul to think of,' she said; 'and I must think of yours since you are so heedless! No, Violet, I cannot countenance gambling. I do not wish to be severe on the marchesa; I pity her for the strait to which she is driven, but I blame her too. Ye shall not put a cushion under sin—nay, not even to bolster up a weak husband!' added Eliza, in a terrible voice.

It was evident she fancied herself uttering a quotation from some Calvinistic divine whose authority stood next that of the Bible, and Violet felt the mistake very natural, since the phrase sounded so like the eloquent denunciations of those stern judges.

She reached the villa towards dusk. As the carriage drove up Nina came flying out into the portico, followed by a pack of dogs, big and little, which barked so furiously that for a few seconds not a word of their mistress's salutation was audible.

'I can only hear the greetings of your abominably spoiled pets, but I suppose, from the expression of your face, I may conclude you are glad to see me,' Violet said, when the noise died away a little.

'Indeed I am! You were so late I began to fear you would not come till to-morrow. Don't abuse the dogs; they are only showing their delight at your arrival. Trot is not here; she is the happy mother of five such pretty puppies. I'll give you a choice among them. You must go and visit her, else her feelings will be hurt.'

'I congratulate Trot on her increase of family, and I cannot say I miss her voice,' said Violet. 'And how are you? Really not well, or was that only a pretext to frighten me into obeying your whim?'

'A happy mingling of truth and falsehood, my dear, as a woman's assertions ought to be,' replied the marchesa. 'I have had neuralgia, and I meant to be ill if you refused. But come in! We have some people to dine—Carlo invited them,' she continued, as she led her friend into the stately old entrance-hall; 'you'll not mind, however, as they are all men.'

'How often must I tell you not to disgrace yourself by repeating such cant phrases!' cried Violet. 'I like feminine society, and so do you; the fashion women have of declaring it a bore is disgusting! I hate their novels for that very reason. They

seem to think they show the superiority of their heroines by making them detest every other woman—moan over the English after-dinner hour—say and do everything to afford men a right to despise the sex from its own confessions.'

'I stand convicted—you are right. I'll never hint such a thing again, even if I think it; at least, not to you,' returned Nina. 'Ah, here is a listener who I am certain approves every word you have uttered with such overwhelming energy.'

The hall widened in the centre to a vast room where couches and chairs were placed, statues lived in the niches, and pictures decorated the walls—a favourite haunt of the household. They had reached the arch as Nina spoke. Violet looked up; the broad space was lighted by several concealed lamps; in the soft, mysterious radiance she saw Laurence Aylmer standing at the foot of the marble staircase which he had just descended. He came quickly forward, face and eyes aglow with pleasure.

'I am so very glad to see you!' he exclaimed. 'I went to your house as soon as I reached town, but you were out—Miss Bronson out too! I was quite in despair,

since I could not call twice in the same day. Luckily I met Magnoletti, and he invited me to come home with him, promising me the pleasure of finding you here.'

'Makes no account whatever of his hostess,' cried Nina. 'Oh, wretched young man! I would never forgive you, only you have come back looking so well that one must pardon you anything—is it not so, Violet?'

'He certainly seems quite recovered,' Violet answered, giving him her hand and a cordial smile.

He had appeared so unexpectedly that she felt startled—of course, only on that account—she had leisure to assure herself of this even while she went on to express her gratification at the evident benefit he had derived from the sea-air.

'Did you hear her diatribe?' Nina presently demanded.

'Yes, and agreed thoroughly with it,' he said. 'I never could comprehend that lack of *esprit de corps* which women show. If they hold each other cheap, they cannot blame men for holding them all so.'

'That is unbearable! I am obliged to endure Miss Cameron's abuse, but I will not yours. Where are Carlo and those familiars of his?'

'They went into the billiard-room.'

'Could not exactly venture to sit down to baccarat before dinner, so must console themselves with a milder sort of gaming; and without even waiting to pay me their respects! Upon my word, I believe Gherardi and Pisano take this house for an hotel, and the rest are as bad.'

'You were not here to receive them: the marchese made your excuses—said you were probably dressing, and proposed the billiard-room by way of consolation for your absence,' Aylmer replied.

'Of course you will defend them! I notice men always stand by each other in an odious fashion.'

'In order to set a lofty example, and cure women of that great error Miss Cameron so justly condemned.'

'Nonsense! You do it because you are all so horribly wicked you are obliged to hang together like brigands,' retorted she. 'There is no hurry about going upstairs, Violet; it is not much after seven. I don't mean to dine until half-past eight; I shall keep those monsters from the card-table as long as possible.'

'Now I wonder—I do wonder what her

real reason may be!' said Aylmer. 'Can you imagine, Miss Cameron?'

'I shall watch to find out; she is certain to betray herself before the evening is over,' Violet answered.

'And she talks about the necessity of women's keeping faith among themselves!' cried Nina. 'My dear, as a reward for having shown that you are no better than your sisters, I'll tell you! My delightful, gallant countryman, Prince Sabakine, is coming. He was obliged to go as far as Milan with the Grand Duchess—could not reach Florence before now—must take a special train in order to do that—there is devotion for you! Well, then, time to dress—forty minutes to drive out here, even with his horses; so you see, I had to say half-past eight! Now, admire my frankness.'

'Since you only confess your iniquity because you knew we should discover it,' said Violet.

'I shall go off to the billiard-room,' vowed Nina. 'You are both too malicious for endurance, so I may as well recollect that I ought to show a little courtesy to Carlo's evil spirits.'

She ran gaily away. Violet sat down upon

a couch just inside the arch, annoyed with herself for a ridiculous impulse to follow her friend. Something in Aylmer's eyes brought a remembrance of those visits the professor had forced her to pay his patient. To recall the broken revelations of his delirium always fluttered her, and just now the sensation vexed her. It was too absurd to remember what a man had said in fever—as if he knew whom he addressed or what he uttered!

'And my dear old Diogenes, is he quite well?' she asked.

'Oh yes; kind as ever, and as resolute to be considered a Black Forest wolf,' Aylmer replied. 'I can give you no idea of his goodness since we have been away. But indeed the sympathy I have received in quarters where I had no right to expect it, leaves me bankrupt in gratitude.'

'We agreed not to talk about that,' Violet said, 'since I have certain debts which I cannot pay.'

'You know I consider it the greatest favour fate ever showed me that I was permitted to be of use to you,' he exclaimed.

His voice and eyes lent this speech a meaning far beyond compliment, but the phrases themselves sounded like the ex-

aggerated flattery any man might have felt it his duty to offer, so they afforded her an opportunity to retreat from the subject with a jest, though it hurt her to jest upon that theme.

Aylmer at once followed her lead in the direction she gave the conversation, perhaps a little afraid to dwell upon the serious side of the adventure which had carried their intercourse so far out of the ordinary track—afraid lest he might utter words he had no right to speak. Such liberty would be worse than ungenerous, since the peculiar footing on which they had been placed by his accident and its consequences would render it difficult for her to check his presumption as easily and decidedly as she might have done in the case of another who committed the blunder, after so brief an acquaintance, of betraying a secret which his heart or fancy had garnered. So they talked of any trifle which either could snatch at, gaily, carelessly, as befitted the moment, yet there was a subtle difference which rendered the conversation unlike an ordinary *tête-à-tête*—a difference perceptible to the woman as to the man though she would not allow her soul to admit the fact, while he gloried therein.

Miss Cameron began admiring a stand of plants near the sofa ; he selected some graceful drooping blossoms, and wound a few green sprays about them.

'There is nothing so pretty in the hair as these little fern leaves,' he said, as he handed her the bouquet, and his eyes asked her to wear his gift.

'Unfortunately, neither the blue-bells or the ferns suit the colour of my dress. One can't venture to be inartistic in these days,' she answered ; and then recollected that she had replied to his glance rather than his words.

'You ought never to wear anything but white,' he exclaimed, quickly. 'I always think of you as you looked the night I met you here. You were in white, too, the first evening you came into my prison——'

He paused, conscious that a word more might take him back to unsafe ground, then added, with a laugh too tremulous to perform its duty well : 'I was so much indulged by you all during my illness that I forget I have lost the privilege of being autocratic in my opinions. I still occasionally find myself scolding the professor, and before I had been here an hour the marchesa had to remind me that I was no longer absolute.'

Nina appeared again at the instant, and spared Violet the necessity of any reply.

'I am going upstairs,' she said; 'I could not miss being ready for my model Russian. 'Come and see how pretty I have made your rooms, *Violetta mia!* I expect you to be so charmed that you won't have the heart to desert me, or them, for a fortnight. By that time I trust the workmen will leave Casa Magnoletti free, unless they have some special reason for forcing me to spend my life in the country.'

When the marchesa had left Violet's dressing-room, Clarice said to her mistress:

'I have laid out that new green costume for mademoiselle.'

'I shall wear white,' returned Miss Cameron.

'Mademoiselle has lived in white of late—positively lived in it! People will think she has only one dress!' pleaded Clarice, in despairing accents. 'And the green costume is a perfect picture—*vert tendre,* mademoiselle!'

Violet was putting her flowers in water. She dropped them hastily into the little vase, slightly uncomfortable as she thought why she had dissented from the maid's choice.

'*Vert tendre* be it,' she answered.

'And mademoiselle will look like an enchanted princess,' cried Clarice, gratified, as humanity always is, by having her own way. But when half dressed Violet glanced at the flowers. Surely she need not be ashamed to do so little a thing as wear a particular colour to please a man who had saved her life. The absurdity was in hesitating—as if there were any reason why she should hesitate! 'I don't like the green; I am too pale this evening. I shall wear white,' she said, with decision.

And white it was. Clarice never attempted expostulations when her mistress spoke in that tone.

Her toilette completed, Violet took the bouquet, separated it, put a part in her hair, and fastened the remainder in her corsage. As she was thus occupied, a bloom so delicate yet so rich stole into her cheeks, a light so brilliant yet so soft flooded her eyes, that when she turned from the mirror, Clarice, with a magnanimity few mortals would have been capable of displaying after such recent rejection of their advice, cried out:

'Mademoiselle was right! She is fairly dazzling!'

'You are a prejudiced little goose,' Violet said, laughing.

But she was looking her loveliest, and she knew it. The vivid blue flowers over the white brought out the fairness of her neck, which the square-cut boddice revealed; and the open sleeves showed the matchless arms, which were the admiration of every sculptor in Italy.

Aylmer was standing near the door as she entered the drawing-room. He got no chance to speak, for the marchese and the guests who had not yet seen her came forward to claim her attention. But Violet caught one glance from those dark eyes, so eloquent in its appreciation of her compliance with their owner's wish that she had an uneasy sensation of having done wrong in obeying his caprice.

Then Sabakine was sent by the hostess to bring Miss Cameron to the sofa where she was seated, and altogether Aylmer found no opportunity to address a word to her, and he betrayed his annoyance so plainly to the marchesa's keen eyes that she took occasion to say in his ear:

'I told you this morning that after Carnival comes Lent.'

'So it does, and one submits; but it is a shame of you to forget there is a *mi-carême*,

he replied, with a readiness which delighted the appreciative Russian.

'You are very near it—trust me,' she said.

When they entered the dining-room he discovered what she meant. Of course Miss Cameron fell to the host, but Aylmer's seat was at her other hand. Nina, occupied by something Sabakine was narrating, found time to dart a quick glance towards Aylmer, and give him an infinitesimal nod, which said distinctly :

'*Mi-carême* at last, you see !'

And if he had been her adorer instead of her friend, she could not have received a look of more fervent gratitude.

CHAPTER XI.

SET RIGHT.

So the dinner proved delightful to the young man; one of those banquets of the gods whereof each of us has partaken in turn.

In the drawing-room afterwards everything went well for a time. Under a pretence of wanting to smoke, Carlo and his friends strayed into a distant salon; Sabakine and Aylmer remained with the ladies, and a *partie carrée* is by no means unpleasant to a man when he has not reached a stage where he is at liberty to utter his thoughts freely to the object of his fancy.

But presently into the quiet came the sound of carriage-wheels, and directly there appeared a knot of people sufficiently intimate with the marchesa to come uninvited for the purpose of enlivening her seclusion.

Foremost among the group entered Giulia

da Rimini, stately and Cleopatra-like as usual, on her lips that indolent half-smile, and in her heavy lidded black eyes that inscrutable expression which Nina so cordially hated. The duchess took the explanation upon herself, making her voice distinctly audible through the comments and laughter of her companions, low and unemphatically as she spoke:

'We were all at the opera; it was worse than usual. Then nobody had a reception—nobody had offered a supper, so I proposed that we should drive out by moonlight and see you, Nina darling.'

'You are always having happy inspirations, dear Giulia,' returned the marchesa, with her sweetest smile.

'Who would venture on a supper, duchess?' exclaimed Sabakine. 'You have rendered that impossible by your brilliant success. I shall never pardon you for having given it while I was away.'

Nina was in ecstacies—so was everybody else—but the duchess proved equal to the occasion.

'I am ashamed now, prince, to recollect that our friends made themselves so charming, I had no opportunity to miss you,' said she,

and passed on to greet Violet. 'My dear Miss Cameron, what an unexpected pleasure! Why, Mr. Aylmer, is this you or your double? I thought you safe at the sea-side, in the hands of your doctor.'

'Heavens!' muttered Nina. 'If she could only teach people to tell falsehoods with such grace, she might earn a fortune.'

'She makes a very fair living at cards as it is,' returned Sabakine; 'don't suggest the idea, or between the two professions she will ruin us all.'

Nina's implied belief that the duchess had known whom she should meet was perfectly correct, and her proposal to her friends to drive out to the villa had been caused by that knowledge.

Carlo had so far proved obdurate to every attempt to lure him back to his allegiance. If she changed her tactics, showed a willingness to let him go and give Aylmer the benefit of her smiles, the marchese might be roused to dispute the post of honour by her side, and she could then assert that her conduct had been inspired by a wish to punish his lack of faith in her explanation of that unlucky visit to his friend's sick-room.

Society might say what it liked about her;

so long as she did not violate certain conventionalities, Florence could not turn the cold shoulder—her position and family influence would prevent that ; and if she avoided such penalty she cared little whether people called her a high-born swindler or names which designated vices more especially feminine.

So to-night she affected a certain air of familiarity with Aylmer, still preserving her majestic indolence. She forced him to attend exclusively to her, and covertly watched Miss Cameron, in the hope that lady's self-control would not be perfect enough to repress some sign of trouble or annoyance, in case Aylmer had gained any special hold upon her thoughts during the past weeks.

But Miss Cameron, engrossed by half a dozen men, apparently found no leisure to notice the duchess and her companion. That Aylmer had a strong fancy for his beautiful countrywoman, the signora was able to decide to her own complete dissatisfaction. He could not keep his eyes off Violet ; he started each time the duchess's voice recalled him to a sense of his duty, and once was positively guilty of the enormity of asking what she had said and, to add to the crime, apologised for his absent mindedness. These things nettled

the lady ; still they acted as provocatives, and rendered her more determined and eager than ever to dazzle the man and bring him to her feet.

'Where is the marchese ?' she inquired.

'In the card-room,' Aylmer replied.

'Of course ! I need not have asked ! I want to look on at the game—you know cards have a fascination for me.'

He rose with alacrity, hoping that, once within sight of the table, her arch-passion would assert its supremacy and cause her to join the gamblers.

'Mr. Aylmer and I are going to see them play baccarat,' Giulia said to Madame Magnoletti.

Nina had no objection. While courting the goddess Chance, Venus herself might stand close to Carlo, and he would offer no homage beyond an indifferent bow and smile ; besides, the marchesa never wavered in her conviction, founded on a thorough knowledge of her husband's character, that the capricious creature had escaped for ever from the Sicilian's thraldom.

When Carlo looked up and saw the duchess beside his chair, he made a little grimace under his long moustache very like

one of Nina's childish *moues.* Giulia was leaning on Aylmer's arm, apparently absorbed in his conversation even while she tapped her host's shoulder with her fan by way of salutation. Carlo's Italian astuteness fathomed the signora's wiles as quickly as if he had been a woman, and his eyes brightened with sudden amusement when he glanced towards her companion.

'Is fortune favourable?' she asked. 'How very cross Gherardi looks!'

'Because you stopped beside Carlo's chair instead of mine, *duchessa mia*,' said that gentleman.

'Has Carlo lost his tongue?' she continued, employing the marchese's Christian name with the familiarity so common in Italy, and so shocking to dignified Anglo-Saxons.

'I was only trying to find some suitable phrase of welcome. You know I am a slow creature,' he answered. 'Useless, I suppose, to ask you to join us?'

'Later, perhaps,' she said, smiling at the manner in which the question was put. She fancied his tone betrayed pique, and flattered herself that her new line of conduct would speedily bring him out of his pretended indifference.

The other players offered each some remark, then the duchess passed on.

'You do not mean to play?' Aylmer asked, finding it difficult to repress his disappointment within decent limits.

Indeed, his state of mind was perfectly evident to the marchesa when she met them in the conservatory, where she had gone to show Sabakine and several other people some marvellous plant her brother had sent from America, and the mischievous lady derived great amusement from his sufferings, as she adroitly allowed him to perceive.

The duchess believed that he had determined, if possible, to resist her spells. In her present frame of mind this credence, instead of rousing her fierce temper, rendered her more bent on conquering him—that he strove against it was a proof he comprehended his danger. Did he want Violet Cameron's money? Well, perhaps later she would help him win it, but just now the heiress should not stand in the way, either from the inducements her fortune offered or any caprice Aylmer might have for the lady herself.

Altogether, nearly an hour elapsed before the wretched man could escape. The duchess recollected that she must not let Carlo's pique

attain too keen an edge, else it would not serve the purpose for which she meant to employ it. Aylmer deposited her at the card-table with the ungrateful reflection that he knew exactly how Sinbad felt when he got rid of the Old Man of the Sea, and hastened away.

Madame da Rimini was not sorry to see him go. She knew that when she wished to fascinate, she never ought to play cards in the presence of her victim. In ten minutes she had forgotten Aylmer—everything—in the interest of the game. Her eyes blazed with a cold, keen flame like that on Damascus steel; her mouth set so hard that the lips were a mere scarlet thread; two deep lines disfigured her forehead; her fingers shut with claw-like tenacity: her attitude so fixed and rigid that the cords stood out on her neck, and marred her chief beauty, till she seemed suddenly to have grown years older.

Nina and Sabakine stopped to exchange observations concerning her as they strolled through the room.

'She is actually unrecognisable,' Nina said.

'One sees the real woman,' he replied: 'a horrible caricature of what she manages to appear under ordinary circumstances.'

'She is a dreadful creature!' ejaculated Nina.

'Well, yes. If she had not had the good luck to be born *grande dame*, she would undoubtedly have found her way to the galleys before now. Thanks to her being Mazzolini's daughter and wearing Rimini's title, she will probably manage to die decently in her bed,' said Sabakine, with that entire freedom of speech concerning acquaintances which is so marked a characteristic of Florentine society.

'Where is the duke now?'

'In Paris, as usual. They divide France and Italy between them, and manage to keep the best friends in the world. "*Une femme forte*," he said to me last spring, in speaking of her; "but she gives me an abnormal taste for human blood—an unfortunate mania on my part, as it prevents my enjoying her society."'

'He is worse than she!'

'Hum! I could not say that. He as nearly approaches her gifts as a man can. But he is wise to remain in Paris. There is no doubt that on the last visit he paid the house of his ancestors she set fire to his bed curtains when he was asleep, and locked him in his room.'

'I never did quite believe that story.'

'He told me himself as a good joke; it

would have been a better one if he had burned to death, as he came near doing.'

Aylmer found Miss Cameron in the drawing-room, but she was so constantly surrounded that he could not get within reach; and he wandered about in a restless fashion, hoping that at least after the guests' departure he might have her for a few minutes to himself; but when he came back from seeing some lady to her carriage, Violet had disappeared.

'Miss Cameron has gone to bed, like a sensible woman,' said Nina, 'and I shall follow her example—I am tired to death. My Russian bored me, Carlo has been losing money, and you have neglected me shamefully, Mr. Aylmer. The world is dust and ashes, and I shall go to sleep. Good-night.'

After she had gone, Carlo, who prided himself on conducting his household according to English principles in many ways, asked Aylmer to have some sort of liquid refreshment and a cheroot—oblivious that his Anglo-mania failed in the present instance, as he was drinking orgeat and seltzer instead of brandy and soda, and his smoking-room, as usual, the place where he chanced to be when in a mood for a cigarette.

But Aylmer declined these mild Italian attempts at dissipation, and went off to his chamber, feeling that the evening, which began so charmingly, had ended in a very dismal fashion.

The next morning the professor came out to see his late patient, and amused them all by his account of an interview with Miss Bronson. He had gone to the house, unaware of Miss Cameron's absence, and found Eliza in a very elevated mood, from the effects of an æsthetic tea given by some old maid on the previous evening.

She delivered a long lecture upon his heterodoxy, warning him of the evil repute it would bring in this world and the Dives-like destiny it must inevitably procure in the next. He drove her nearly frantic by declaring that the book he had so often proposed to dedicate to her was ready for the press, and improvised an inscription which asserted that her sympathy with his peculiar views had been his sweetest solace during the long hours devoted to the preparation of the volume.

'I left her in tears,' said the professor, with grim delight; 'and I affected to think it was the proof of my esteem which touched her. The more she tried to explain and to

reject my friendship and my heresies, the duller and deafer I grew. At the hour it is, I am certain she has assembled a conclave of all the spinsters among her acquaintance, and is searching for some means to avert the awful fate which hangs over her.'

Aylmer was haunted by a fear that he had fallen in Miss Cameron's esteem. He could not say that her manner had changed—she talked freely and pleasantly; but, in spite of his efforts to believe himself mistaken, the impression remained in his mind that a certain distance had come between them—as if he suddenly stood on the footing of a mere acquaintance, instead of enjoying the friendly relations which had grown up during his convalescence.

But in what way could he exculpate himself? He inwardly rebelled, as circumstances often force a man to do, against sundry injustices in the social code which give women like the duchess an opportunity to place him in a very unpleasant position without the privilege of defence—a position where silence is self-condemnation, yet to open his lips must make him appear a conceited idiot.

The marchese and Aylmer were in the billiard-room before dinner. Aylmer was

saying that he must drive into town to inquire concerning some letters which had failed to arrive.

'Keep out of the duchess's way,' said Carlo, who was almost as much given to teasing as the professor himself. 'If she gets those pretty tiger-claws of hers on you, my friend, you will not be allowed to come back to us.'

'Confound the duchess!' returned Aylmer. 'Never—never—in any country did I meet a woman so odious! I used to wonder how you could dance attendance upon her, but I see you have recovered from your folly.'

'Come, come, that is turning the tables on poor me with a vengeance, just because I gave you a friendly counsel out of the goodness of my heart!'

'Your goodness of heart be—blessed!' said Aylmer.

'I saw how she was worrying you last night,' continued Carlo, laughing. 'I would have gone to your rescue, only I was busy. If you wouldn't make it so plain that you are blind to her fascinations, la belle Giulia would ten to one let you alone.'

Before Aylmer could reply, Miss Cameron came in from the conservatory.

'Marchese,' said she, 'Nina says you purloined the little microscope the professor gave me yesterday. Positively, you are as bad as a magpie for hiding everything you can pick up in your pockets.'

'Friend of my soul, magpies don't wear pockets. It is odd that though the feminine mind conceives comparisons in profusion, they are always incorrect,' cried Carlo.

'Less incorrect than your habit of petty larceny—it quite amounts to—to—what is that long word, Mr. Aylmer, which it is proper to use when a marquis steals, instead of a poor common wretch who must go to prison therefor?'

'Kleptomania, do you mean?'

'Exactly! Take care, Carlo, or it will lead you to a lunatic asylum! Do you intend to give me my microscope? We want to examine some leaves.'

'What a persistent creature! I have lost it—I never had it—I gave it back to you,' said Carlo, hunting in the multifarious recesses of his coat, which he fondly believed a thoroughly English garment, and finally pulling out the desired article.

'Here it is, after all; I must have picked it up by accident.'

'I notice that your sins are always committed by accident,' returned Violet, 'and I never knew a man who met with so many misfortunes.'

'All the same, I suppose Aylmer and I may go and look at the leaves; he is an ignorant young person, and needs to improve his mind in various ways.'

'I certainly chose ill when I selected your society for that purpose, my dear Carlo,' rejoined Laurence.

'You will have to adopt his pet excuse—the victim of accident, Mr. Aylmer,' said Violet.

She spoke carelessly; she smiled with even more indifference, yet Laurence's heart bounded; he knew that his peace was made—the distance had been bridged over—the ice which had spread between them, chilling him to the soul, imperceptible as it was, had melted suddenly—he was back in June warmth again.

She had heard the marchese's words—fortune had favoured him indeed. He could have hugged the unconscious bringer-about of this present state of affairs.'

'After all, one can't help liking him in spite of his errors!' said Laurence, clapping

Carlo on the shoulder by way of giving a little relief to his feelings.

'Praise is sweet, but it may be too forcibly expressed,' said the marchese, pretending to groan.

'May we go and have a peep through the microscope, Miss Cameron?' Aylmer inquired. A few minutes before he would have felt as if taking a liberty in asking anything of her, but his courage was entirely restored.

'Violet Cameron!' Nina called from the terrace upon which the windows of the billiard-room opened. 'If you think to leave me to study botany alone, while you monopolise the only two men available, you do not know the woman with whom you have to deal! I am amiable and I am self-sacrificing, but there are limits, I warn you!'

'She might at least have sent you the microscope,' said Carlo, 'if she had any conscience.'

'The most powerful microscope ever invented would fail to discover any such treasure in your anatomy,' retorted Nina.

'What did I say about women's inability to make comparisons?' cried Carlo, triumphantly. 'Angel of the house, conscience is

not a treasure—learn that before you turn on your husband when he generously comes to your assistance.'

'And a statement is not a comparison, Master Carlo,' said Violet; 'learn that.'

'Oh, good heavens! These displays of rhetoric all come from the professor's leaving that horrid microscope; pray break it, Mr. Aylmer, or there will be no living with the pair,' cried Nina.

The three joined her on the terrace, and laughed and talked nonsense and were very happy, while the day drew to its close and the western sky waxed glorious as if the farthest heavens had suddenly opened. Woods and fields glowed with amber radiance—the very highway became a band of dazzling light—the river a halo. In the distance appeared beautiful Florence, a sweep of burnished roofs and glittering walls—Giotto's tower and the vast dome of the cathedral rising in the midst, while on the height above, San Miniato's church seemed floating in space; every object glorified, transfigured, by the supernal light.

CHAPTER XII.

THREE-AND-THIRTY.

The four spent many such idle, pleasant hours, and time fled with the rapidity it displays when life has reached, as it does occasionally, a season where no important event occurs to mark its course, though each day is so full of tranquil enjoyment that our usually restless souls forget to look back or forward.

Their intimacy with Nina and Carlo insensibly drew Violet and Laurence Aylmer into an intimacy almost as complete, affording them an opportunity to become more thoroughly acquainted with each other's real characters than months of ordinary intercourse could have done.

On the eighth day Lady Harcourt drove out to the villa, and insisted upon taking Carlo home with her to dine and meet some friends whom she had invited.

'I must have an even number,' she said, 'and of course Nina and Violet can more easily spare the mated masculine bird than the one with unclipped wings.'

At table the marchesa was seized with a nervous headache, and obliged to go to her room.

'As you both belong to the Anglo-Saxon race, I need not offer any absurd excuses, or carry Miss Cameron off,' she said. 'I will lie down awhile; then I shall be ready for some tea and your united fascinations. Make yourself agreeable, Mr. Aylmer, and remember I give you permission to smoke—Violet doesn't mind in the least, sensible creature that she is. You shall have your coffee on the terrace. It is a shame to stop indoors such a lovely night. And now I will retire, while I can do so with grace and elegance.

So the two guests were left to entertain each other.

'We were told not to stop in the house,' Violet said, walking towards an open window. 'Obedience and inclination can be united for once. What a marvellous evening!'

Aylmer followed her out upon the terrace, and they sat down. The old majordomo came with the coffee-tray, and placed it on a tiny

table between them. He brought also a wrap for Miss Cameron, saying:

'Pardon, signorina; but one gets a chill so easily.

'Hardly in this weather, Pietro; it is like summer,' she said, amused at his addressing her by that girlish title.

'And not weather to be trusted, because it is unseasonable,' persisted Pietro.

'Certainly this is the realisation of one's dreams about an Italian autumn,' Aylmer said, as he put the shawl over Violet's shoulders.

'Yes, and you are very fortunate, since it is your first experience. As a rule, the nights at this season are almost as sharp here in Tuscany as in our own middle States.'

They sipped their coffee and conversed in a desultory fashion upon any and every subject that chanced to float up—of their friends, Carlo and Nina, people in Florence, some new books, the lovely effect of the moon on the hills, the tints a painter would require to express the shadows the cypresses cast—shadows which looked black, but were not, one discovered, after studying them.

Gradually the conversation grew more earnest, as talk about books brought forth indi-

vidual opinions; and, sitting there in the moonlight, Violet Cameron's loveliness heightened tenfold, and wrought its natural effect upon the man beside her.

A brief silence ensued; something Aylmer said set Violet dreaming, and he did not recall her; but when she glanced towards him, he was regarding her so earnestly, with such involuntary revealings in his eyes, that she felt the colour deepen in her cheek.

'I was wondering where you had gone,' said he.

'I was only watching the moon,' she answered.

'More than that—you looked as if your soul had drifted off into the farthest brightness.'

'How very poetical!'

'That was the way you looked. I began to fear you would never come back. It would have been worse than the distance that seemed to come between us just at the beginning of our visit here,' he said, trying to speak jestingly, though an undertone of earnestness was very perceptible.

'Now that is more fanciful than your other poetry,' returned she.

'No, no,' he said, 'it was not fancy; and I

felt quite frozen—as if I had been exiled into some bleak Arctic region.'

'I hope you have come back from your exile,' she answered, laughing, though with a little effort. 'It must have been voluntary.'

'Indeed, no. But I have come back—please don't banish me again,' he pleaded, with an impulsiveness the more striking, the more attractive, too, from its contrast to the usually quiet manner which made him appear older than he was. 'Say you will not! If I do anything, or seem to do anything of which you disapprove, try to think you misunderstand—to believe I would cut my right hand off sooner than risk your censure.'

Before he finished the sentence he had ceased even to attempt a pretence of playfulness.

'At least I can assure you there is no distance of my making between us,' she said. But this phrase did not exactly suit the exigencies of the case, so she continued, before he could speak: 'No distance at all, I mean. I hope we are very good friends. You may be certain that if I do misjudge you—and I may often, being an impatient woman—I shall never hesitate to atone for my blunder.'

'Thanks!' he exclaimed, with more em phasis than was necessary, extending his hand as he spoke.

Now Violet did not want to take his hand; it would give a seriousness to the explanation from which she shrank, yet to refuse might appear a ridiculous, prudish calling him to order. Still she hesitated, vexed with herself for so doing, as a rapid question flitted through her mind. Was she afraid? if so, of whom—him or herself?

And he was waiting with his hand outstretched, his eyes on her face—only a second, of course, long as the interval seemed to her. She got her wits back—oh! the shame of having lost them even for the space necessary to demand the reason of her soul! She tapped his fingers lightly with her fan, and said:

'This is not a last dying speech, that we should grow tragic over it.'

'I told you those weeks of imprisonment had made me exigeant,' returned he, trying to speak calmly. 'But, after all, it is not my fault—everybody spoiled me.'

'Then I suppose we must have patience with our own work, unless you make it absolutely necessary for us to put you on a moral

diet of bread and water,' said she, with a radiant smile, which set his heart beating so rapidly that he almost thought she must hear its pulsations.

'You could not fail to be kind and generous,' he answered, the unsteadiness of his voice giving a significance to his words which made them too earnest for mere compliment. 'I will try to deserve it—at least you may be sure of that.'

The tone, the eager look in his eyes startled Violet still further out of that deceitful calmness which she had kept unbroken during the past days by treating her own soul with as much reticence as if it had been a stranger's, but she replied with assumed lightness :

'Take care you keep your good resolutions. If that were as easy in practice as it is in theory, what admirable creatures we should all be !'

'I never felt my own failures as I do since I have known you. You are so much better and nobler than other women that you make one ashamed of common thoughts and aims,' he cried, carried so completely beyond self-control that he could not weigh his speech.

He had never spoken like this. Violet's troubled sensation grew stronger, not at the words themselves—she was too accustomed to

men's flatteries to have noticed these—but the tone in which they were uttered—the passion of his eyes, which said so much more than voice or phrase—fairly confused her, and rendered difficult the effort to treat his remark lightly, skilled as she was in the knowledge whereby a woman accustomed to society increases her natural feminine tact.

'You forget, only yesterday we agreed that exaggerated compliments were very uncomplimentary things in reality,' said she, laughing, 'a presupposing of inordinate vanity on her part who receives them.'

'You know I did not intend a compliment —I was just thinking aloud!' he exclaimed, each instant carried further away from the restraint he had hitherto managed to put upon himself.

'Monologues went out along with the old-fashioned novels,' returned she, that effort at playfulness growing still more difficult.

'I seem to know you so well; all those weeks of illness make the beginning of our acquaintance look so far off. Oh, I don't think it had any beginning where I was concerned; it was just as if I had found something I had lost and been searching for ever since.'

She was so beautiful in her quiet pose ; the moonlight made her complexion so unearthly in its fairness, her eyes so superhuman in their dark glow, that the man lost his head altogether ; forgot all his wise resolves, forgot everything save that in this glorious creature he had found the ideal perfection which had haunted his fancy so long.

What did he say—what did she answer ? Neither could have told ! He did not make love to her in the ordinary sense of the phrase, but he let his whole soul out as he hurried on in eager talk of those blessed days when she brightened his sick-room with her presence, and Violet was moved by his eloquence to forget for a few moments that just below the height to which his imagination had floated them, the bleak rocks of reality showed sharp and cruel in the common light of the common world.

Then the very fire of his speech forced reflection upon her. What did this language mean ? Was she to think that his heart—— Oh, she would not even complete the absurd thought ! Mere compliments—empty trash —such as young men talked to any woman tolerably pretty and attractive, who chanced to sit with them in the moonlight ! Part of

a young man's education, but not the style of conversation for her to listen to—for her, sobered by the weight of her three-and-thirty years! How nonsensical to be fluttered even for an instant! Was it possible that the dreamy idleness of these past days, whose spell upon himself he described so vividly, had enthralled her too? No, no! Back to the realm of common-sense and commonplace! Wisdom, Violet Cameron, wisdom! An old maid—yes, an old maid! No Juliet of eighteen on her balcony with Romeo below; a spinster, well on towards middle age, just as near as if her face were plain and wrinkled already (as it ought to be), instead of keeping, from some absurd freak of nature, a semblance of youth—a cruel freak, since it exposed her to this—to the bitter consciousness that not only had fancy led him astray, but she, she had let the charm of this lotus-flower crowned season wile her into forgetfulness.

And all the while he went on speaking, and all the while her heart and soul were thrilled by his eager words, even in the midst of her ability to listen to the upbraidings of her suddenly roused judgment.

What was he saying—oh, what was he saying?

'Ah, admit that all these things at once put our acquaintance on an exceptional footing—that they prevent my seeming just like the ordinary crowd about—at least say so much!'

'We are very good friends, and mean to stay so,' she heard her voice say, not speaking from any volition of her own; she felt as if some guardian power spoke through her, good-natured enough to wish to save them both future pain: save him at least—no matter about her—an old maid's sufferings from a wounded heart were only laughable! Well, well, in order to waken him it was only necessary to tell her age; his dream—if he had been dreaming—had occupied his imagination merely—a young man's fancy! Yes, tell her age and he would speedily discover that he had deceived himself in regard to his heart having stirred, just as her face by its deceitful smoothness had deceived him into a belief that she was young enough to be the cause of such commotion.

'How old are you?' she asked, abruptly.

Aylmer was not exactly confused, but a little taken back by this interruption to his blank verse. Some vague remembrance of

speculations in regard to her years, which he had several times overheard, flitted through his mind—influenced his reply too.

'I am twenty-eight,' he said; 'at least, I shall be so soon that I may call it my age.

He was exactly three months and four days past twenty-seven, but then mathematical precision always sounds sententious and absurd!

'I am twenty-eight,' he repeated, as if the second assertion would do away with the fact of the birthday not having yet arrived.

'And I am thirty-four; at least (to quote your words), I shall be so soon that I may call it my age,' returned she, with the merriest laugh that ever made music on the lips of a girl at sixteen. Laugh she would—laugh gaily too, if the effort killed her; though if she could not have laughed, she would have been ready to kill herself, she said mentally.

I am trying to relate events exactly as they occurred—to give a description of feelings just as they arose, whether wise or foolish, orderly or inconsequent—so I must tell the whole. Aylmer felt as if he had suddenly received a douche of ice-water full on his fired fancy! An unmarried woman of four-and-thirty is

almost an old woman—that was the one conscious, stupid thought in his mind.

'Yes, I am thirty-four,' continued Violet, still following his speeches as models—no bitterness, no hesitation in her tone—her voice soft, airy, careless, and full of enjoyment. Somehow, she did feel a certain triumph, as if crushing her own vanity. Later, a measure of sadness and regret might mingle with the remembrance, but for the instant the comical side of the situation appealed to her, and her amusement was perfectly genuine. 'Too old, you see, not to have exhausted the pleasure of exaggerated compliments; especially averse to being treated to them by my friends—my real friends.'

Still under the influence of that sensation, which I can only describe by my comparison of the douche of ice-water, he looked at her again as she sat laughing—her eyes brilliant, her colour heightened, her complexion soft and transparent as a child's. She was jesting—quoting the verdict of some envious woman—curious to see if he would credit it.

'No doubt you will be thirty, and thirty-four, if you live long enough,' he said, laughing too.

He recognised the doleful commonplaceness

of the remark, but he was too determined to consider what she had said a joke to attempt compliments which might imply any faith in its having been serious.

A certain bitterness seized Violet; whether towards him on account of his unbelief, or against Fate for its cruelty, she could not have told.

'Must I bring a certificate of birth in order to end your courteous doubts?' she asked. 'I shall be thirty-four years old within the twelvemonth.'

She was in earnest, he perceived that. Further expression of incredulity would appear an impertinence. Yet never had he seen her look younger—never so beautiful!

'You'd better not let the girls of seventeen know the fact, else they will certainly strangle you,' he blurted forth, with a schoolboy sort of honesty so ludicrously out of keeping with his six feet of stateliness that somehow the answer sounded as complimentary as it did absurd.

'Promising young man!' cried Violet, laughing again, though now her laughter stung away down close to her heart. 'But no more pretty speeches, please. I told you the truth to do away with the necessity. I

am tired of sugary talk ; I have had enough ! No need of it, even between a man and a woman, when the two are friends.'

She held out her hand, recollecting as she did so how a few instants previous she had shrunk from accepting his; but the recollection only rendered her more resolute in her frankness—she was three-and-thirty, and could claim the privileges of her age.

But the spell of her beauty was too potent for any wise warning of hers, any flash of disappointment, long to affect its influence ; it surged back with redoubled force from the very reaction of that brief shock.

'Friends !' he echoed, pressing his lips upon her fingers.

He might have said more—have shown her that he pronounced the word in repudiation of his willingness to be kept upon the calm ground of friendship, but she prevented any such dangerous avowal by interpreting his exclamation into an acceptance of her tacitly-proposed treaty.

'That is right—thanks ! And now you will remember that flowery phrases are a little—just a little out of place—say twelve or thirteen years too late !'

Her determined jesting, though it hurt and

vexed him, produced one fortunate effect—it brought a conviction that if he did not acquiesce in thus pushing the conversation back to an ordinary footing, he should risk vitally injuring his own cause, and, agitated as he was, he managed with more address than many men would have shown.

'I'll weed out all the flowers carefully henceforth,' he said, trying to imitate her playful tone.

'The sure way to keep me good-natured,' she answered. 'The rosebud style makes me feel silly.'

'Oh, there are exceptions to all ordinary rules,' said he. 'If you will have eternal youth you must take the consequences, as the few other women so endowed had to do in their time.'

He stopped short. Ninon's name had been on his lips as a comparison; then he remembered that Ninon and every other woman whom history had chronicled as holding, past youth, past middle age, the undimmed loveliness which gave them absolute sovereignty over men's hearts, had been women whose conduct rendered any reference to their names exceedingly out of place in this connection.

'True,' said Violet, quickly, by the strange

clairvoyance which the great sympathy between their minds gave her, reading his thought as plainly as if it had been uttered. 'But unfortunately, as you reflected after speaking, all the examples you can think of were wicked women.'

'Oh!' he exclaimed, with an indescribable impatience.

'Well, well, I am sorry they were bad,' said she, pitilessly.

'And to compare——'

'Yes, yes, never mind—don't be shocked. Recollect that a woman of my age has a right to talk freely on all subjects. The years which have lost me youth give some compensation—I may say things a girl could not, and yet be neither indecorous nor indelicate.'

She resolved to cure him effectually—to cure herself too, or rather so to sear any possible wound by the hot iron of sarcastic speech, that it should close and heal without delay. The scar would remain, no doubt—ah, even physical wounds received after early youth leave an indelible scar! Well, the sight of it, maybe the ache of it now and then, would be good for her soul.

She found time, in the instant which followed her last remark, to elaborate with

womanly quickness her thought much further and more clearly than I, with my clumsy pen, have been able to express in that paragraph of description, yet be ready before he could speak to pursue her advantage by another thrust of the hot iron which was to scorch them both into recovery.

'Good heavens! surely I may say what I like! Past thirty-three! Why, if I had married at sixteen, as so many American girls do, I might have almost grown-up daughters about me. No freedom of speech would have been considered unfitting then.

She had overdone her work! He looked at her as she spoke, immortal in her youth apparently, rose quickly, and held out his arm, saying:

'Come into the house a moment, please.'

She obeyed, thinking that, whatever his reason for the demand, compliance therewith would put an end to the conversation, which had gone far enough.

He led her into the salon, where the lamps were burning brightly, and, before she suspected his intention, conducted her towards a great mirror and pointed to the radiant image shining therein.

'I can't help laughing,' he said; 'it is too absurd.'

Violet gave one glance at their figures reflected side by side, and turned quickly, saying, with as much iciness as her voice could muster :

'Facts are stubborn things ; dates the stubbornest facts of all.'

'I don't care about dates,' cried he ; 'they have no significance when so utterly refuted. I don't care !'

'But I do,' said Violet, and removed her hand from his arm.

Before he could answer, Nina appeared in the doorway, exclaiming :

'Oh, there you are ! My headache is quite gone. Please to amuse me and make me forget my dreadful dream ! I saw Giulia da Rimini pushing a woman over a precipice, and I screamed out ; and it was you, Violet—I saw your face then. Mr. Aylmer was trying to save you, and somebody—a young girl—looking helplessly on ! Oh, it was horrible ! don't let me think about it ! Ring the bell, Signor Lorenzo ; we will have some tea. I need it, and you ought to, after all my trouble in my dreams about you both.'

CHAPTER XIII.

SHE ACCUSED HERSELF.

ALONE in her room that night, Violet sat down opposite her mirror, looked sternly at the reflection therein and began to ask it certain questions, determined to have them answered if she waited till the sun rose.

What ailed her—what had come over her during these past weeks—and to what must she attribute the strange mental aberration whereof she boldly accused herself?

Laurence Aylmer had conceived a fancy for her—very probably he called it love; a young man's fancy was the correct name, and Violet nodded severely as she put that portion of her soliloquy into words.

'You are not a girl, not even a very young woman, that I should call in any modest reticence to your aid,' she told the image, which smiled at this remark, thereupon

appearing so youthful in its radiant loveliness that Violet cried out in wrath: 'You may try with all your might to look twenty-four, but you are an old maid just the same! You will be four-and-thirty your next birthday, miss—you can't delude *me!*'

But this thrust, which gave her the more satisfaction because it hurt either her heart or vanity, had no effect on the image; it smiled at her still, serene in the arrogance of beauty.

'Four-and-thirty!' repeated Violet, venomously, and tried to wrinkle her forehead, but the image would only copy her pretty dimples, apparently regarding the frown as a mere shadow not worth photographing.

'He is seven-and-twenty,' pursued Violet; 'seven-and-twenty—why, a boy still, who must indulge in a score of fancies before he learns what love means! And you like him—yes, you do! I am too much ashamed of you to give a stronger name, though you deserve it. And you have been dreaming about fate and called your acquaintance with him something set outside common laws, because a few little romantic circumstances surrounded its commencement. And you never have loved anybody: destiny wasted

your girlhood so far as love was concerned—except once, and then you had neither soul nor brains to appreciate the man who came to you with the offering of his great heart—a man worth a score of this Romeo you are poetising over!'

But here the image looked such utter and overwhelming unbelief, that Violet was forced to retract the assertion if she desired to fulfil her vow of being perfectly honest.

'No, I don't mean that. He is as clever and honourable and good as he is handsome; oh, I am not afraid to speak the truth!' and she fairly shook her clenched hand in the glass. Then hearing her own voice clear and distinct, started and glanced over her shoulder, with a nervous fancy that she was not alone with her own reflection in the mirror, but that some supernatural agency was directing the whole matter. A sudden feeling of pity struck her for that beautiful face, and she exclaimed: 'It is hard—hard! Life gives you everything when it is too late—too late!'

She leaned her head upon the table and sobbed like a child, she whose tears so seldom flowed without good reason, and then were usually caused by the woes of others, not her own.

In the commonplace light of the morning, Violet felt reassured of her own strength—felt a little grave, sad too; naturally, she admitted, after recalling the chill uneventfulness of her girlhood, the emptiness of that spring which ought to have held experiences enough to crowd all later years so full of happy memories that even age would not appear barren.

This thought kept her from being ashamed of her tears. She had reason to regret her youth, left void of what renders youth beautiful. Neither gratified dreams nor hopes had come within its reach; it had waned and died without attaining youth's highest apotheosis—love. She had been defrauded, and neither here nor hereafter could existence atone for the wrong. She might be happy in this world and the next, but that void in memory would always remain. No compensation could be made her; the blank could never be filled, because it was now too late to let her heart waken, even if the enchanter were to call with such power that his voice sounded like the summons of Destiny itself.

Love was for the young; to her age belonged moderate sentiments. Friendship,

esteem, affection, if one pleased; but four-and-thirty and love were anomalies as absurd as low-necked dresses on some spinster of Eliza Bronson's years, and the consequent display of bones which had done such good service for half a century, that it seemed at once ridiculous and unfeeling to expose them now.

The very passion of Violet's mood would have proved to another person that in spite of her assertions she had not reached a standpoint so wholly within the control of reason and common-sense as she believed. Some vague idea of this nature occurred to her, and she gave a new fling at the image, which, though a little pale and sad-eyed, only looked the more lovely in its softened guise.

'It is silly even to think of what might have been,' Violet said to her victim; 'wicked too—a rebellion against Providence.'

The image stared at her with a sudden bitter smile on its beautiful mouth—a sudden fire in its beautiful eyes, and seemed to say:

'I hate Providence then, if it is the fault of Providence that I am to have no youth!'

Violet started up, frightened, as you and I have been more than once when our souls have cried out with supernatural strength

against their human miseries, roused by some catastrophe to utter the unanswerable demand of a reason for those griefs and disappointments, to bear which has seemed at such moments the sole ground to assign for our creation.

As Violet was leaving the hands of the skilful Clarice, the roll of carriage-wheels became audible ; voices, too, from below made themselves heard in the dressing-room, situated in an angle of the building that commanded a view of the entrance.

'Why, I am sure it is Mademoiselle Bronson !' exclaimed Clarice, running to a window and peeping out. 'Yes, yes, it is—and the professor. She weeps, the poor demoiselle—oh, how she weeps !'

'What can be the matter ?' cried Violet, hastening towards the door.

'Mademoiselle should not disquiet herself,' counselled Clarice, philosophically. 'The good Demoiselle Bron-son weeps so easily ! The professor laughs ; he pretends to be comforting her—but he laughs, the wicked one ! He is always happy to tease the poor lady ! It is nothing—mademoiselle may be assured it is nothing.'

When Violet reached the lower corridor,

she saw her friend standing in the door, talking excitedly to old Pietro, though with no other effect than to make him look utterly helpless and imbecile, as in her agitation she spoke English, while the professor leaned, calm and dignified, against a pillar, regarding her with his most sphinx-like smile.

'I want Violet!' moaned Eliza, breaking off in what appeared to be some recital of disaster, and turning desperately upon the sage. 'Oh, professor, don't stand there like a bronze statue, but say it so the creature can understand, for I am so troubled that I cannot speak my own language, much less his! Violet —I must see Violet!'

'And here she is,' said that lady, moving forward.

Miss Bronson uttered a shriek and fell upon her neck, weeping bitterly. Pietro discreetly disappeared, and, in his wicked enjoyment of the spinster's distress, the professor stood on his left foot, and with difficulty kept from waving his right leg in the air after a fashion which would have been highly unbecoming a man of his reputation and scientific acquirements.

'I hope there is nothing serious the matter,' said Violet, loosening the clasp of

Eliza's arms, so as to be able to breathe and speak.

'Matter!' groaned Miss Bronson, and paused, choked by sobs.

'How do you do, Fräulein?' asked the professor, as beamingly as if Eliza had been chanting a humorous ditty. 'We have come to make you an early visit—give us welcome!'

'I perceive that you have,' replied Violet, unable to repress her laughter at the ludicrous contrast between Eliza's misery and the savant's determined, not to say diabolical, cheerfulness.

'Don't laugh—don't!' moaned Miss Bronson, sinking into a chair. 'Oh! oh! the ceiling fell and ruined everything! A wreck—a mere wreck! I said I'd better escape with my life, and so live to tell you; and I brought the professor—most improper—but not a time to stop for ceremony! And, oh! I did all I could—I'd have held it up with broomsticks till I was crushed; but how could I support a whole house? And I warned you not to buy it—you must admit that! I begged and prayed you not to buy it! Two lone ladies in a corrupt foreign land! So do not blame me; oh! that I cannot bear! it is too much—too much!'

'What does she mean, professor?' demanded Violet.

'All fallen in—all!' cried Eliza. 'Yes, tell her, professor; break it as gently as you can. Be prepared, Violet—be prepared. And I begged you not to buy it—I prayed you to flee from the wickedness of this Papistical country!'

She sobbed so loud that it was impossible for the professor to utter a syllable, but he reassured Miss Cameron by a glance which in a less distinguished personage might almost have been considered a wink.

'Try not to sob so loud, Eliza,' said Violet; 'you will rouse the whole household: besides, you don't give the professor an opportunity to tell me what is the matter.'

'Speak, professor, speak!' ordered Eliza, 'when I have begged you, implored you to tell the tale! Oh, was there ever a man so perverse?' and her sudden irritation against the savant helped to compose her slightly.

'Miss Bronson has been somewhat agitated,' the professor began.

'*Somewhat!*' repeated Eliza, in a strangled scream.

'In fact, she had a little fright——'

'A *little* fright! Oh, if that is the way

you state matters, pray let me break the awful news myself,' said Eliza, putting her handkerchief to her eyes, and then removing it to bestow a withering glare upon the sage. 'I *thought*—yes, I own it, I thought, professor, that at such a moment your much-vaunted friendship for Miss Cameron would have asserted itself! I fondly believed that you would employ such mental resources as you could command to break gently to her the catastrophe!' Then her dignity failed, and she began to wring her hands, crying: 'Oh, Violet, Violet! the whole house may have fallen in by now—everything ruined! and I begged and besought——'

'Yes, I know you did,' interrupted Violet. 'Come, whatever the accident—and I suppose it must be something terrible—at least you are alive and unhurt. And here is the professor safe too, and ready to unfold the tale, if you will allow him.'

'Oh, the professor!' exclaimed Eliza, in high scorn; 'he is safe enough, and as useless as only a man can be. Standing there, dumb and deaf, when he came on purpose to help me impart the news; though a person who pretends to have a dozen Oriental languages

at his command might, one would think, find some tongue in which to reveal the tidings !'

'If I had a pencil I would attempt to make it clear in hieroglyphics on the door-post,' said the professor.

'And that is the way he has treated me during the whole drive !' cried Eliza, spreading wide her hands with a gesture of despair. 'I could not have believed—no, unless he had proved it himself—I could not have believed that any human being would behave as he has done to a friend—a lady !'

'Heavens, professor, what do I hear ?' said Violet.

'I did my best to soothe her,' replied the professor, every feature of his grim face lighted with ecstatic enjoyment. 'Why, she was quite composed and laughed heartily during our drive. It is only seeing you that has unnerved her.'

Eliza gave him another disdainful glance, and turned away her head, rising slowly and with majesty.

'Violet,' she said, 'if you will permit, I shall go up to your room and repose myself for a little. Now that you know the worst —now that I have told you what has happened—I feel the effects of my late terror.

It only remains for me to thank Professor Schmidt for the great assistance he has given in this moment of need, and to assure him that I heartily regret having burthened his scientific mind with our troubles.'

She swept down the corridor towards the stairs, looked back over her shoulder to say:

'You have your usual rooms, I suppose, Violet?'

'Yes, my dear,' replied Violet, mildly, and Eliza disappeared.

The professor rubbed his hands and chuckled.

'Fräulein,' said he, 'I have seen her under the influence of many varying emotions, but I don't think she ever gave us anything so delicious as this! She really has surpassed herself! I wish—oh, I wish I could have embalmed her with that expression on her face!'

'Now tell me what foundation there was for her distress?' asked Violet. 'I suppose the house is not quite in ruins?'

'A bit of the ceiling fell in one of the anterooms,' the professor explained. 'I had gone to the house to beg our beloved Eliza to send you a little parcel (only some

pamphlets you wanted), and then I thought I might as well go up stairs and write you a note. She dashed out just as I reached the landing, with half-a-dozen women after her as frightened as herself; it was even better than the poisoning scene, I assure you.'

'Poor Eliza, to have to depend upon you for sympathy!' laughed Violet.

'Nobody could have been more sympathising than I was,' said the professor 'She finally decided to drive over here and tell you the fatal tidings, and as I had nothing to do, I thought I would accompany her and see you all. Everybody is well, I hope? Have you taken good care of my Laurence?'

'Here he comes with the marchese, so he can speak for himself,' Violet said, as Aylmer and his host appeared from the garden. She exchanged greetings with the two gentlemen, then went away to find Miss Bronson, not sorry to escape the eager questioning-looks which Aylmer's eyes cast upon her.

She would return home; that determination seized her while mounting the stairs. The accident which Eliza had come to report would serve as an excuse, and she wanted to

get away. Just now, to remain under the same roof with Aylmer would give him so many opportunities of renewing the conversation of the previous night that she should be at a disadvantage. After a few days of not seeing her, he would have had leisure to attain to a more sensible mood, be ready to listen to her wise arguments, and not trouble the course of their friendship by any further approaches to romantic folly.

She found Eliza established in an easy-chair in her boudoir, drinking sal volatile and water, and relating the accident to Clarice, who listened with well-simulated interest.

'So a bit of the ceiling fell in the antechamber,' said Violet, as the maid retired. 'Quite a special interposition of Providence. I always hated those frescoes.'

'Really, Violet,' observed Miss Bronson, looking horrified, 'it is positively wicked to speak in that light way——'

'But since no harm was done!'

'Such a state as the room is in! And we might all have been killed—every soul in the house, and half the people we know into the bargain!' cried Eliza. 'And you to speak so carelessly instead of being grateful—yes, prayerful, over our escape!'

'I'll be as grateful as you like, my dear; but I can't help rejoicing at the opportunity for changing those frescoes. You are safe, and so is the rest of the household—our friends are, too—no damage done that I can discover.'

'It is downright cruel of you to speak like that, when you know how fond I was of that dear little rococo dog; and he never ought to have stood on the anteroom table, and now he is smashed to atoms, and nothing left but the end of his beautiful little red tail with a black spot on the tip!'

'My dear, he was only china! We'll stop at Janetti's this very day, and I'll buy you a more picturesquely ugly one even than he. I saw a charming beast there—vivid green—mediæval—with no tail at all, but he had two heads to make up for the lack! So don't be downcast, Eliza.'

'It is your levity that troubles me,' said Eliza; 'if I could only teach you to see that life is a serious matter—that we are creatures of an hour; here perhaps to-day, and to-morrow—ah, where? Who shall say—gone like sparks——'

'Or your little blue dog with a red tail!' interrupted Violet.

'Heedless, unreflecting girl!' sighed Eliza.

'Signorina!' muttered Violet, thinking of the previous evening, and feeling so near mingled tears and laughter, that she felt herself as absurd as Eliza. 'If I don't take care we shall be two hysterical old maids together!'

'What did you say, Violet?'

'I say that I am going back to town with you. I have an excuse, and, to own the truth, I am not sorry to get away.'

'Why, nothing unpleasant has happened, I hope? Nina hasn't done anything to annoy you?'

'What an idea! And the marchese——'

'Oh!' broke in Eliza, lifting her hands and eyes towards heaven, and beginning to shiver, 'Oh, after that, nothing will ever surprise me! But you don't mean it. He wouldn't —he hasn't——'

'Hasn't what, in the name of goodness?'

'Yet why need I be surprised? Those Italians—one is never safe! But, for Nina's sake—poor Nina!—oh, I hope he hasn't——'

'What do you mean?' cried Violet. 'Speak out. You quite make one's flesh creep.'

'Creep! yes indeed! The wickedness of these Florentines is enough! I need not wonder; and yet—and yet—oh, try to think you were mistaken! He hasn't——'

'Yes!' shouted Violet in desperation. 'Now are you satisfied? If so, try to become sane and talk of something else.'

'Oh!' ejaculated Eliza anew, 'I knew he would, sooner or later—I expected it—I warned you!' she added, with the resignation of a person who, after enduring suspense for months, feels a certain sensation of relief when the blow falls. 'Those dreadful Italians—all alike! Poor Nina—his wretched wife! My dear, I'll break it to her if you think she ought to be told. I will not shrink from duty, however painful. I will not desert you, my poor darling!'

'Well, that's kind of you, at all events.'

'And he has—he has! I thought you looked pale—no wonder! You are right to leave the house. Oh, if you had only gone before!—it is too late now to prevent what has happened——'

'Suppose you tell me what that is?' asked Violet.

'You said the marchese had been making love to you! If you told it as a jest, then I

can only say I think it very unbecoming and indelicate to joke upon such matters!' cried Eliza, angrily, as Violet's peals of laughter warned her that she had misunderstood the state of the case.

'Poor Carlo, I am sure he would think it a great hardship,' Violet said, as soon as she could speak. 'Now, Eliza, rein in your vestal imagination for the rest of the day; it really is too brilliant for anybody but a sensational novel-writer to own.'

'I think you are very unkind, Violet. I know you don't mean to be, but you always forget how sensitive I am! You are so heedless, so unreflecting, so——'

'Young!' added Violet, with mocking emphasis. 'Don't leave out that item in the count! And now let us go down to breakfast. Mind you stand by me, for Nina will be outrageous and try to keep me; but I must go—I really must; I do so want to get home!'

'Something has happened, I am sure of it!' cried the spinster.

'Something will, if you don't stop teasing me,' returned Violet, laughing again. 'I shall certainly do you a mischief, my blessed Eliza, before my ill-spent existence comes to an end

—I know I shall; I feel it looming in the future, as the poets say.'

Then Eliza laughed too, and felt greatly relieved—she always did after having made a scene; and luckily, by allowing her that privilege now and then, during the rest of the time she managed to conduct herself with very tolerable equanimity, and was not in reality, taking the year together, more trouble or annoyance to Miss Cameron than any human creature must be who is flung on one's hands the twelve months in and out, even though that segment of humanity had a genius equal to Michael Angelo's, or a face as pretty as Madame le Brun's portrait, painted by her own partial brush.

Violet expected the marchesa to be horribly indignant over her departure—perhaps uncomfortably curious as to its cause; but nothing ever happens as one anticipates.

Carlo had brought news that the workmen had at last left Casa Magnoletti free.

'So we shall flit ourselves immediately,' Nina said; 'and therefore I forgive your desertion, Violet.'

'Going to-day, Miss Cameron!' cried Aylmer, dolefully.

'Going!' repeated the professor, saving her the trouble of reply, 'and so are you, young idler! You are to get to work; I have plenty cut and dried, and came on purpose to carry you back to it.'

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ARABIC LESSONS.

Miss Cameron returned home, and amid the plenitude of sage resolves which she indulged at this period, determined that she would no longer consume so many hours in idle visits and amusement.

On the way to town she admitted the professor into her confidence, and consulted him upon the feasibility of studying Arabic as an employment which could not come under the head of frivolous recreation. He encouraged the idea because he was to be her teacher, though he knew as well as she that the whim would only prove a means for wasting his time and hers ; but with the usual determined blindness of humanity, he no more admitted the fact to himself than Violet allowed her motives and feelings to stare her in the face

without some veil of pretence flung across their features.

The professor grew enthusiastic over her plan, and endeavoured to discover numerous benefits certain to accrue therefrom. He laboured so hard and failed so ignominiously, that Violet at last burst out laughing, and the professor laughed as heartily as she, while Eliza Bronson looked severe disapproval of their levity.

'I can see nothing ludicrous in the project of serious study,' she said; 'and I do not know, Violet, whether I am most surprised at you or the professor.'

'I am as serious as the grave,' began Violet, but Eliza lifted her hands to enjoin silence.

'Do not be profane,' she cried with a shudder; 'do not!'

The professor bounced in delight—no other word can serve, savant though he was—he bounced, and Violet nodded her head in responsive enjoyment, while Eliza stared coldly upon them, and presently observed with fine disdain:

'As you are not Chinese mandarins strung on wires, but reasonable, rational human beings——'

'Not I, at least,' interrupted Violet.

'With immortal souls,' pursued Eliza, impressively.

'Not proven!' broke in the professor. 'We are simply, my dear, dearest Miss Bronson, huge masses or agglomerations of molecules.'

'Violet, stop the carriage!' shrieked Eliza. 'I'll walk—I'll walk every step of the way from here to the city gates, rather than be exposed to listen to such horrible theories! After the escape we have had—when the very ceiling fell as a warning, to hear him talk like this!'

'*Ach, mein Gott!* now she accuses me and my heresies of causing that disaster,' exclaimed the professor, with a hypocritical attempt at a groan.

'Sir,' said Eliza, 'I accuse you of nothing—I leave that to your conscience——'

'No well-organised animal has one,' interposed the professor.

'And your Maker!' added Eliza, in a sepulchral whisper. 'Beware, Doctor Schimdt, beware!'

'*Potztausend!*' gasped the professor.

'Spare me the coarse horror of those Teutonic oaths,' said Eliza, with majesty. 'For many years an instructress of the young—a

position which I trust I held with credit to myself, with good effect upon others——'

'I am sure of it,' cut in the professor.

'I became (if you will hear me out),' pursued Eliza—'I became too conversant with the harsh intricacies of your native tongue, not to comprehend those expressions which, alas! are only too redundant in your language—too ordinarily on the lips of men who ought, from their talents and position, to be models——'

'*Sapperment!*' faltered the professor, shrinking into a corner of the carriage.

'Like you,' continued Eliza, following up her advantage.

'Then, if I am a model, that's enough.'

'As you ought to be,' cried Eliza, making the sentence all capitals by her energy.

'And is not,' said Violet; 'so, my dear, the professor and I will return to Arabia, and settle about the hours for our wanderings there.'

Eliza pulled her veil over her face, leaned back in her seat, and withdrew her attention from all mundane matters and sinful triflers sporting recklessly on the verge of the abyss, which was the good spinster's favourite appellation for the mystery-shrouded existence beyond this earthly sphere.

The first decisive step Miss Cameron took, in accordance with her resolution to waste less time, was to deny herself to Giulia da Rimini.

'She is at home, and *he* is with her!' thought the Sicilian. 'Only wait! I will punish her for her insolence before three months go by—only wait!'

The flash in her black eyes so startled her footman, as he stood at the carriage-door awaiting further orders, that he afterwards told the coachman he would rather break stones on the highway in a galley-slave's dress than call himself Duca da Rimini, so long as that fiery-orbed dame lived to bear the title of duchess, though Alps and Apennines and all the other mountain-ranges of Europe might tower between him and her.

Violet insisted upon commencing her Arabic studies without delay, but, to her astonishment, when the professor appeared on the appointed morning, he came accompanied by a second pupil—no less a person than Mr. Laurence Aylmer.

'I had already promised to give this ignorant fellow some lessons. I can't afford to waste time over two separate scholars—you must just stumble on together,' the pro-

fessor explained, with an easy assurance which quite took Violet's breath away—with such dogged determination, too, in face and voice, that in any case she could hardly have ventured to question his dictum.

'I expect speedily to grow so Oriental that I shall talk in hexameters, or whatever may be the Eastern equivalent for that unpleasant form of verse,' said Laurence, so far from making any excuse for the liberty the professor had taken in presenting him, that he seemed to Violet triumphant; as if he had managed to thwart her in some way, and, for the life of her, she could not help colouring under his glance, though she felt vexed with him and herself therefor.

'I hope Mr. Aylmer is willing to begin with first principles,' said she, opening at random the book nearest to her hand.

'At the very alphabet, and to work his way up step by step,' replied Laurence, with an odd ring in his voice.

This time she would not so much as look towards him; she had no desire to see the significance of his speech accentuated by the light of those dangerous eyes.

The professor glanced at each in turn from under his shaggy brows.

'Humph!' said he. 'One strange language at a time. I am here to teach you Arabic—don't exercise your wits before me in a tongue that I cannot understand.'

After this speech a silence came upon his two pupils, and he took advantage of it to expound his peculiar theories as to the way in which Oriental languages should be studied; proved conclusively that anybody who could not acquire them with great facility, in a very brief space of time, by pursuing his original method must be a dolt; and wound up by informing the pair that he did not expect either to do him or his system any credit, though it would undoubtedly be the fault of their powers of application, and not of their brains.

Then, without rhyme or reason, he glared anew at the pair; then he ejaculated, in a growl like that of a hungry lion:

'*Sapperment!*' and neither of his scholars asked him what he meant, or what had caused the unseemly outburst. Violet had her eyes fixed on the trimmings of her gown, as if counting the threads in the fringe; and Aylmer was finding difficulty in settling his arm-chair at a proper angle as to the table, and the professor glared in vain.

'So!' said he, and flung open a volume with a bang. 'Begin, you, male pupil, because it is a masculine right, and it is only a false, unnatural and depraved state of society which has given rise to the habit of offering precedence, out of a mawkish sentimentality styled courtesy, to the female animal. Begin, I say!'

And his pupil meekly obeyed.

'Upon my word,' chuckled the professor, when the lesson was finished, 'I take great credit for my power of discipline, and I must say you certainly seem inclined to prove yourselves prize scholars in point of obedience.'

And this time Violet, feeling Aylmer's eyes upon her, did not hesitate to glance towards him and to return his smile, which thereupon grew so joyous that her troublesome conscience immediately began to reproach her for having already failed in the letter as well as spirit of the bond she had signed and sealed with Wisdom, leaving the regulation of her conduct entirely in the guidance of that goddess.

About a fortnight later, Violet received a letter from America announcing Mrs. Danvers's death—news for which previous epistles

had prepared her. The date of Mary's sailing was not fixed. A friend in New York, with whom she was now stopping, would make the voyage with her, so her cousin would have no reason for anxiety, but at present Mrs. Forrester found it impossible to name the day for starting.

The weeks went by; autumn waned; December came, but the weather retained its amiability, and there was not even a suggestion of ice or Tramontana in the air.

It seemed to Violet that she lived more quickly during this period than in her whole previous life—lived so much and so far, that often she had to count the weeks day by day in order to satisfy herself that they were so few: yet even after doing this and being numerically convinced, the sense of time—of a great length of time having passed since her return to Florence—remained as strong as ever. Pleasant, pleasant weeks, save when now and then she roused up to fear that she regarded life less practically than she ought, but finding always excuses wherewith to content reason, with whom she still regarded herself as on the most intimate terms.

The Arabic studies speedily sank into a farce, whose name neither professor nor

scholars had the assurance to mention, though the lessons continued and formed an excuse for many delightful hours. Often the teacher would fail to appear, or would come very late, giving as a plea that he had been occupied and forgot. But Miss Cameron's fellow-pupil never forgot ; he was always punctual to the moment, and Eliza Bronson, who, with her habit of taking things seriously, believed in the lessons and several times presented herself as a spectator, was so edified by the diligence with which during her visits Mr. Aylmer studied the big books with their mysterious characters, that she felt confident of his rapid progress, and convulsed the professor by declaring that she had known from the first he would possess great capabilities for the language.

'By the shape of his head ?' suggested the savant.

'No,' said Eliza ; 'I have relinquished phrenology as a failure, so have all thinking people. I am surprised you should betray any faith therein, professor—you who have so little to spare.'

'For that reason I cultivate it whenever I can,' said the professor.

'By the shape of his nose,' pursued Eliza,

regardless of the savant's mild attempt at exultation. 'I tried to get you to read that interesting pamphlet in regard to the expression of noses, but you would not. Now, Mr. Aylmer's nose is as purely Arabian as if he were an Arab, and so——'

'Is a second-hand clothes-dealing Jew's,' added the cruel professor.

He had great difficulty to make his peace with Miss Bronson after this offensive speech; any remark which militated against Mr. Aylmer's superhuman excellence, physical, mental and moral, being a positive crime in her eyes.

It would be useless to deny that learning Violet Cameron's age had given Laurence Aylmer a certain shock: no man could discover that he loved a woman so much his senior and not feel the situation an anomaly.

'Why, when I was forty she would be almost fifty; a man is young still at forty. Marrying a person older than himself would seem like choosing a guardian instead of a wife!'

So his thoughts ran on several occasions, but were always speedily checked by the reminder that he had no reason to suppose

Miss Cameron would ever dream of wedding him. In his penitence he said bitter things against his own conceit, unjustly too, for he was far from that commonest form of masculine vanity—the belief that every woman who smiled at him must be his incurable victim, and that he needed only to mention marriage to the Venus di Medici to transform her at once to flesh and blood, and cause her to descend from her pedestal as meek and obedient as an [odalisque gratefully stooping to pick up her sultan's pocket-handkerchief.

Indeed, those reminders of her age speedily faded ; the thing simply seemed impossible in the presence of her fresh loveliness. He perceived, too, that in feeling she was as youthful as in her face ; younger far than he, for his somewhat morbid, reserved temperament had given him opinions and habits of thought more like those of a person who has passed the meridian of life than of one still so distant from that era.

Day by day his love for Violet grew the ruling power in his soul, and he knew that there had come to him an affection which must be as lasting as existence itself.

He loved her, and chafed restlessly under

the restraints which she managed to put upon their intercourse. She treated him like a valued friend both in public and private, but frequently as he saw her alone, she contrived, with a tact few even of her sex could have shown, to keep their conversation aloof from dangerous subjects, to prevent any avowal in words.

His eyes told his story plainly enough, however—those beautiful eyes whose passionate utterances made her heart thrill tumultuously—whose light haunted her in lonely hours, often weakening her wise resolves till she was ready to believe she wronged him in calling his love a mere fancy, making her weep sometimes over her lost youth, and causing her to repeat that bitter complaint :

'Everything comes too late ! Life is cruel to me—very cruel !'

CHAPTER XV.

ANNOUNCED—'MISS DANVERS.'

The last rays of the setting sun brightened the room where Violet Cameron sat idle and meditative after a long morning given up to visitors.

Nobody else was likely to appear at this hour. Miss Bronson had gone to her own apartments, believing she told the truth when she announced her intention of reading a sermon by way of a little improving occupation, so as not to feel that mere mundane matters had wholly engrossed her day. In reality, she went to enjoy a short nap, but the tortures of the Inquisition could not have forced her to admit even mentally that she was capable of giving way to such a weakness of the flesh, wasting any of the precious spare moments which ought to be devoted to 'improving the time'—a phrase often on her lips.

So Violet, left to solitude, yielded without scruple to the luxurious indolence which crept over her, and let her fancies wander whither they would, unconscious that in these days she indulged herself more and more in the visionary habit which only a few weeks previous she had assured reason she was determined to relinquish. Had she been roused suddenly she could not have told the subject of her reverie. A thousand vague thoughts flitted like strains of music through her soul; hosts of events connected with the past autumn, unimportant yet strangely sweet, wove themselves like soft rhymes into the melody, and not a measure but held some reference to the friend linked so closely with all the pleasant recollections of this season—her friend Laurence, as she called him always in her reflections—the very title a safeguard against any importunate warning from conscience or common-sense.

Antonio abruptly flung Aylmer's name across the idle sweetness of her reverie. It so often happened that he appeared at similar junctures that occasionally Violet was almost startled by the coincidence—only almost, for even if one were unpractical enough to admit the idea that some subtle magnetism of

thought brought the coincidence about, it would only be a proof of the sympathy which must exist between two minds in order to render friendship perfect, and that this their intercourse was, and was to remain, Violet had so thoroughly impressed upon her soul that very rarely did any troublesome doubt intrude.

And he entered now, eager and glad, through all conventional calm of manner; she glad too—right and fitting surely on his part and hers, since he was her friend—her friend Laurence.

'Is it past all decent hours for a morning visit?' he asked, as he sat down opposite her, after paying the first salutations.

'Entirely! Well-regulated people are beginning to think of their dinners.'

'But I am not well regulated.'

'It is fortunate Miss Bronson does not hear. You would risk your lofty place in her esteem by such a humiliating confession.'

'Well then, I forgot it was so late. Would that excuse satisfy her?'

'I am afraid not; it is so palpably an afterthought that even my credulous Eliza would not be deceived.'

'Then it is better to take refuge in truth,'

said he. 'I waited on purpose till I was certain everybody would be gone. One never gets a chance to speak to you when you have a crowd of people about.'

'What a shocking accusation! A good hostess can make each of her guests, no matter how many she may have, feel himself especially noticed.'

'I fear I am dull to-day—not equal to social requirements,' said he.

'The idea of paying visits in such a mood! I expect people to amuse me.'

'You don't look in a humour for it; I saw that as I came in.'

'Pray how did I look?'

'Like a Sybil—like some priestess of Apollo——'

'Oh, worse and worse! Miss Bronson would give you up in despair! Even moderate exaggeration is distasteful to her—but this! Besides, she considers any reference to the heathens or their deities highly indecorous, not to say wicked.'

'How lucky she is absent! In my present state of mind I should be certain to ruin myself hopelessly,' he answered; but the smile on his lips belied his regret so expressively, and the light in his eyes grew so

dangerous, that Violet wished the spinster were there. She perceived that he was in one of the moods which would recur in spite of her prudence, when he became difficult to manage—moods which disturbed temporarily the conviction she insisted upon considering settled, that no vagrant fancies were to trouble the even tenor of their friendship.

'Ah, you admitted you felt dull,' said Violet, catching quickly at any advantage; 'I think Eliza would not condemn that severely. She has great patience with dull books, why not dull people?'

'You mean to impress my unlucky choice of a word on me—three times in that one sentence!'

'Good gracious! do you wish to insinuate that I am dull too?'

'Even my blankest stupidity could not carry me to such a point. Sometimes I wish you were; you would not be so quick to flay and scarify every little truth that utters itself in spite of me.'

'What a quantity of long phrases! And it is not the truth I find fault with—scarify, as you poetically term it—only that bad habit you will not cure of paying exaggerated compliments. I have told you over and over

that such nonsense between friends was unnecessary.'

'I didn't think you would call speaking from my heart nonsense,' said he, rushing on forbidden ground at once—assuming, too, the purely masculine privilege in such an encounter, of seeming hurt by her levity or indifference; let a woman feel as deeply as she may, her sense of womanly dignity must prevent her employing that weapon. 'Say a liberty—an impertinence, if you will—but not nonsense.'

'We won't quarrel over mere words,' returned Violet, pleasantly, with the comfortable assurance of being mistress of herself and the situation.

'Excuse me, but it is a question of feelings, not words!' cried he, with another dangerous flash from his eyes, which shook her confidence as to the ease with which she should keep the ice of conventionalities unbroken—nay, worse still, brought a swift fear that she had too hastily exulted at her victory over the image in the mirror. 'Only listen—only let me explain!'

'Compliments do not need explanation,' returned she, holding fast desperately to that signification for his utterances. 'A woman

who has seen as many seasons as I, and heard as much persiflage talked, does not hold a man *au pied de la lettre* for every poetical speech in which he may think gallantry compels him to indulge.'

'That is unkind!' said he.

'Come, I'll not acknowledge it! If you had said uncivil, I might have owned you were right, but unkindness implies an intention to wound. I am sure I don't wish to punish your bad habit of paying compliments so severely.'

'Compliments! How you insist on using that word, when you know it is utterly misplaced; unwise, too, considering your standpoint.'

'How unwise?' she asked, and realised that she had given him an advantage, but the question was uttered.

'Because such very determined affecting to believe everything I say persiflage, looks almost as if you were afraid of recognising my earnestness, and you know——'

She knew what he was going to say; another instant, and he would hurry on in passionate speech, which would effectually destroy the guise of friendship to which she had, with so much trouble, confined their

relations. She knew it; the delicious utterances thrilled her as if already pronounced, but prevent their expression she must.

'You are right,' she said; 'I am afraid!'

'Violet!' he exclaimed, speaking her name for the first time—a passionate joy breaking out in face and voice. He made a quick movement to seize her hands which were resting upon the table before her. She did not remove them out of his reach, but she clasped them hard together till they looked cold and firm in the shadowy room as two sculptured hands, while something in her eyes, as she looked full at him, prevented his carrying out his intention, though again her name broke from his lips: 'Violet!'

'Let me speak,' she said, outwardly calm, in spite of her agitation. 'Yes, I am afraid—I will tell you why. I do not wish to lose my friend—I do not wish to have our pleasant intimacy (so very pleasant to me) disturbed; and this must happen if he will not remember that any approach to flirtation on the part of a woman of my age would be as unworthy her, as any brief fancy on his for a person years older than himself would be misplaced and unnatural.'

She spoke the words very slowly, very

composedly; but oh, they hurt, they hurt, in spite of her strength and courage!

'Oh, all that——'

'Is truth and common-sense,' she interrupted, smiling. 'So now let us be sensible, my friend—Laurence.'

And she spoke his name too for the first time. If a voice from the portals of heaven had called bidding him enter, the tones could not have sounded more entrancing to his ear. Every effort she made to break his chains only riveted them closer.

'So we will get back to the regions of common-sense and stay there,' she continued before he could speak, smiling at him still, even while her heart shivered and ached as if she were pressing a weight of ice down upon it. 'Remember, if you talk in a way to make me feel silly, I shall think it is because I have been trying to affect the graces of a young girl, and so be obliged to despise myself at almost thirty-four; recollect, Laurence, almost thirty-four!'

He dared not continue—he knew that he should receive his dismissal then and there if he did; yet to let himself be so effectually checked was not only painful, but irritating.

'You are hard—hard!' he exclaimed,

wisely taking refuge in an affectation of petulance which would afford her an opportunity to pretend to think it only his man's vanity she had wounded. 'I wish I were ill again—I wish I had never got well!'

'Upon my word!'

'I do! You were kind then. Ah, I dare say you have forgotten; but I remember everything—the slightest detail—even to that day when you laid the flowers on my pillow.'

How stupid she had been not to tell him the truth long before! Yet perhaps it was fortunate after all that she had not—it would come with more force now.

'I have never forgiven the professor for robbing me,' he added.

'You could easily have had more from the same quarter,' said she, laughing.

'Why, you have never so much as given me a rose-bud since!' retorted he.

'Oh, I had nothing to do with the matter! You must thank the Duchess da Rimini! It was she left the jessamines—romance is not my forte.'

'What do you mean?'

'Just what I say—romance is not——'

'No—no! You did not put the flowers there?'

'Most certainly not! I hope I am free from prudery, still nothing but necessity would have induced me to pay you visits.'

'And you have let me deceive myself all this time!' he cried, with mingled anger and disappointment.

'Really, I did not suppose you recollected the poetical incident,' said she, laughing again.

'Oh, you are hard to me—hard!' he exclaimed bitterly.

But before he could add another word the door opened, and Antonio's slow, measured voice announced:

'Miss Danvers!'

END OF VOL. I.

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